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The Poetry of History: Irish National Imagination
Through Mythology and Materiality

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Abstract

The thesis culminates in the twentieth century and yet it begins with the Ulster Cycle, a period of Irish mythological history that occurred around the first century common era. Indeed, since the time frame was before the arrival of the Gaels, Normans, or Christianity, the extent of this mythology's relevance today is whatever extent it is conceptualized as "Irish." As such, the first chapter locks onto an aspect that could feasibly transcend time and resonate with modern Irish society: gender. Of course, the epistemological dynamics of gender¹ in the first-century common era are vastly different than the twentieth century dynamics, but there is still more prevalent resonance in terms of gender than, say, martial exercises, cattle raids, or the intervention of minor "gods." Most importantly, the poetic conceptualization of gender in Irish mythology is a major factor in the continued imagination of the Irish national character. Specifically, Medb is a figure of femininity (and Ireland herself) whereas Cúchulainn embodies Irish masculinity and the compulsion to fight, even against immense odds.

Medb and Cúchulainn's prevalence and the general exhortations of Irish mythologies continue well into the 20th century, as evident in Yeats's poetry. As such, the second chapter focuses on the transition into the Irish twentieth century and is oriented primarily on Yeats. Eavan Boland is also heavily featured in this chapter, for her later work poses an essential deconstructive framework to compare against Yeats's; conversely, Pádraig Pearse and Dwyer Joyce are also regarded due to their mystical resonance with Yeats. Yeats's earlier poems were often more indulgent in Irish mythology and the speaker

¹ That is, how gender is conceptualized and how gender dynamics play out.

often explicitly refers to writing poetry through verse. Yeats's later poetry is much more cautious about projecting Ireland's future from a past fraught with mythology, especially as he cannot meaningfully register this abstracted mythology with the brutal material reality of Irish revolution and colonialism. This ambiguous uncertainty is most clearly and poignantly expressed in his poem "Easter, 1916." The Easter Uprising of 1916 poses a violent interruption to the reliance on mythologized historiography, especially in the context of some Irish republicans' belief in a mystical "blood sacrifice" for Ireland through their deaths (but not their triumphs). Ultimately, 1916 is the key factor to a contingent sequence of events: the Irish War of Independence, the Irish Civil War, and, decades later, The Troubles.

As such, the third and final chapter focuses on The Troubles, and the concurrent poetry of Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland.² Given the overbearing weight of violence and uncertainty during this time in Ireland, these poets augment Yeats's feeling of uncertainty expressed in "Easter, 1916". Providing a crucial deconstruction of many of the poetic and historical pretenses that conditioned and exacerbated sectarian beliefs, Boland and Heaney thoroughly navigate the value of Irish mythology and history. By grounding history and poetic narrative in the material and personal, they carefully reject using poetry or history as political frameworks for justifying continued violence. On the contrary, their deconstruction of Irish culture and history affords modes of understanding the personal and affective experience of colonial violence; this, in turn, spurns the kind of poetics and

² Unfortunately, the day that I wrote this introduction (4/27/20) was the day in which Eavan Boland passed away in Dublin. I would just like to note my condolences to her family and loved ones, but I am certain that her supreme poetic aptitude will carry her memory indefinitely.

histories that are detached enough from material violence to perpetuate such violence, whether unknowingly or not.

Preface

The discursive realm of Irish Studies is, like many academic fields, replete with a multitude of literary and historical works of varying perspectives and concentrations. The sheer breadth (both in terms of subjects and time-periods) can certainly be imposing. This thesis entails the work of two distinct time periods: medieval and twentieth-century Ireland. One connecting tissue between them, temporally and culturally disparate as they are, is a continued integration of poetry and history. Poetry is often considered in the context of its historical moment, effectively using historical analysis to inform a literary reading. Conversely, historians may use poetry as primary sources towards substantiating whatever claims they might have. This thesis, however, conducts both modes of analysis simultaneously. Given the immense discursive environment surrounding Irish literature and history, this thesis aims to present commonly-analyzed Irish poetry in a different literary and historical framework through an emphasis on the specific instances in which poetry and history are thoroughly integrated.

The focus of this thesis is to pay attention to the integration between Irish literature and history to offer new analytical approaches, while avoiding the pitfalls of revisionism. Conscious of revisionist history, then, the perspectives posited by the poets themselves will often function as the main conceptual body for approaching history. If there are somehow any major discrepancies between the poetic account of history and different historians' accounts, such discrepancies will be remarked and analyzed. The extent of "historical" analysis is moreover concerned with poetic perspectives on historical events and periods. Specifically, this thesis addresses how poetry can function as a mode of Irish

historiography and how this “poetic” sense of history can, in turn, dialectically refigure and write poetry. In other words, Irish poetics and histories continually rewrite each other, indicating the cultural mutability of history and the power inherent in Irish poetry to depict the personal histories and political realities of Ireland through literary artifice.

Overall, the sense that history is contingent is parallel to the sense that poetry is intertextual; poetry has its own histories and traditions, and, when the poetry is interlocked with *history* itself, then the narrative distinction between poetry and historiography becomes blurred in Ireland. In any case, the integration of poetry and history is insightful for history and poetry, respectively. With history being poetic, the narrativization and historiographical elements become more clear, the artifice that is self-evident in poetry becomes self-evident in history as well; with poetry being historic, the intertextual contingency of poetry rises to the fore, and poetry’s capacity to frame and reconfigure reality becomes apparent when viewing an “objective” history through a poetic lens.

Chapter 1—Gendered Modalities of Power: Historico-Poetics Through Medieval Irish

Poetry

Introduction

Sí ag Éirionnchaibh dá éis soin;

do bhí allmhorchaibh athoidh...

Fuaighfidh le a gníomh gach gartmhagh...³

Attributed to Tadhg Camchosach Ó'Dálaigh in the fourteenth century, this poem exhorts Niall Óg O'Neill of the Uí Néill clan to unite Ireland against the foreign invaders—that is, of course, the Normans. Such an excerpt can certainly have rhetorical appeal for a modern sense of a united Ireland against the common, foreign enemy, for such is translated: “Having been the property of foreigners for a time, she (Ireland) now belongs to the Irish; he (Niall) will unite every plain.”⁴ Such a poem resonates with a modern republican political animus: the poetry *as Gaelige*, the feminine gendering of Ireland as “*Sí*,” the rhetoric of Ireland belonging to the *Éirionnchaibh* instead of the *allmhorchaibh*,⁵ and, ultimately, that Ireland will *fauighafaidh*⁶—that Ireland will unite. The alignment of such republican values also resonates with the poem being written in the fourteenth century,

³ Mág Craith, *Dán na mBráthar Mionúr*, pp. 1, 9; cited in O’Riordan

⁴ O’Riordan, *The Gaelic Mind and the Collapse of the Gaelic World*, p. 23; translation amended.

⁵ To clarify *as béarla*: “that of the Irish” and “that of the foreigners,” both being genitive and plural.

⁶ This coined compound word in particular may suggest a unity of gender dynamics as well, with *fauigh* meaning “to sew,” and *fidh* being a declension of “iodh,” meaning chain or band. Both, however, are feminine cases.

thereby affording a long-standing historical legitimacy to a conventional republican perspective on Irish culture and the national question. Apart from this immediately apparent resonance, there is an epistemological disjunction that conflates the Ireland of today with the Ireland of the distant past. By extension, the theme of ousting foreigners from Ireland is hardly a recent development in Irish culture, for it “appears regularly in the [bardic] poetry from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries” and is often “open to misinterpretation in the light of later Irish nationalist historiography.”⁷ In other words, the cultural landscape of bardic poetry in a late-medieval, Irish *épistémè* has a completely different frame of reference than that of modern political actors who would appropriate such poetry in alignment (or distortion) of their own frame of reference.

The “nationalist historiography” is indeed a sequence of historical claims that aims to revise medieval Irish historical narratives to suit its own political narratives. Such historical revision, however, is not limited to the nationalist project; rather, there is immense capital in the distant past—for its enduring character confers ever-more strength—and there is also immense appeal in the distant past, for there is ostensibly “purity” in it inasmuch as historicity is overlooked for romantics. The political capital and alluring “purity” of medieval Ireland, then, prompts an investigation into medieval literature and history—to see if extricating it from the imposition of romanticized purity and political anima is even possible. Insofar as Irish mythology is imagined as “essentially” Irish (despite obviously pre-dating any modern Irish nation-states) then the signifier of Irish mythology is conflated with the signifier of modern political animus.

⁷ O’Riordan, *The Gaelic Mind and the Collapse of the Gaelic World*, p. 41

Either way, an attempted extrication between signifier and signified will nonetheless reveal the functionality and significance of Irish medieval culture in modern Irish society. Whatever historiographical framework is imposed, one frame of reference remains: the gendered understandings of medieval Ireland, the masculinity perceived to be inherent to poetry, the femininity perceived to be inherent to Ireland herself. As such, an analysis of the gendered modalities of power in medieval Ireland will function as an equipoise to balance the modern political impositions onto medieval culture.

Part One: Traditional Bardic Poetry—A Contested Culture

There is not a single real poet... on whom the [English] public has not solemnly conferred diplomas of immorality.⁸

Herein, Oscar Wilde witfully decries the English as a people that perceive poets as fundamentally immoral. If the act of producing poetry is immoral from an English perspective, then an English colonial subject producing poetry must be, by extension, some unutterable evil. Irish poets were certainly the subjects of such colonial moralizing, for the colonial project in Ireland entailed the;

quite deliberate decision to minimize the distinctiveness of Gaelic culture... so as to legitimate English colonial claims and delegitimize Gaelic opposition...

⁸ Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," p. 23

[Consequently, it] gradually became clear to certain bardic intellectuals that theirs was, in Frantz Fanon's terms, a contested culture.⁹

In this sense, culture is a crucial focal point of both colonial subjugation and resistance. This "contested culture" was the grounds in which English and Gaelic cultures vied for cultural prevalence—a byway of ideological prevalence. The longstanding tradition of Irish bardic poetry, then, was a specific field whereby Gaelic culture asserted itself in the face of colonial-cultural hegemony of the English.

Irish bardic poetry was a tradition that lasted from 1200 to 1600 AD, was ossified in its form (which was *dán díreach*, meaning "direct verse") was written in a Latinized script (even though it was mostly performed more than written)¹⁰ and was a mode of socially reproducing patriarchal values within the context of noble courts. The death of such a poetic tradition was unfortunately accompanied by the "death" of the Irish language. The decline of Irish language and Gaelic culture more broadly was an incredibly long and multivalent process, including: the Anglo-Norman establishment of the Pale from 1170 onwards; the prohibition of Irish in the courts through the Statutes of Kilkenny of 1366; the Tudor period's enforcement of English law and the language thereof; and the politico-economic incentive to speaking English during and after the Williamite settlements and military conquest of the mid-seventeenth century.¹¹ Such a slow process amounted to a sudden "death" of the Irish language by the nineteenth century,¹² reflecting the Marxist notion of numerous quantitative changes conditioning major qualitative changes, whereby;

⁹McKibben, *Endangered Masculinities in Irish Poetry*, p. 6

¹⁰ O'Riordan, *Irish Bardic Poetry and Rhetorical Reality*, pp. 1-3

¹¹ Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language*, pp. 4-10

¹² Although the decline was still considerable by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to varying degrees, significantly affecting the prevalence and functionality of bardic poetry.

“The steady increase in bilingualism was the quantitative change which led around 1800 to the qualitative change represented by the mass abandonment of Irish.”¹³ As such, the decline of the Irish language was so long and multivalent that it is difficult to feasibly track its decline until it suddenly passed into a secondary language by the nineteenth century.

Since the Irish language was the integral component of Irish bardic poetry, the decline of bardic poetry is equally difficult to track. That is, the decline of bardic poetry does not neatly cohere to the decline of the language; rather, bardic poetry was seen by the English colonists as an integral component of Irish culture, and was therefore rooted out to curtail the Irish political apparatus that was reinforced by bardic poetry. In other words, the colonial imposition of English culture and language, “was a crisis that threatened essential social norms, and with them, social reproduction itself,”¹⁴ thereby fracturing the internal cycle of Irish superstructural reproduction of political norms through poetic conventions. In the same sense that superstructural components (such as poetry) affect material conditions, so too was the imposition of English values and language a fundamentally material endeavor; English intervention was not a mere cultural contest, but an imposition predicated on “atrocities, acts of terror, bloody warfare, and still more bloody retribution” conducted for “a rapacious working out of colonial capitalism.”¹⁵ In other words, the colonial project in Ireland was cultural imposition and military action in tandem: the former to erase Irish socio-political formations and the cultural reproduction thereof, the latter to brutalize the Irish into acquiescence, a state of being to implant the “colonized mind.” Ultimately, the death of the Irish bardic tradition was the inability for the

¹³ Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language*, p. 12

¹⁴ McKibben, *Endangered Masculinities in Irish Poetry*, p. 17

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 19

Irish to reproduce Irish social values on their own terms and in their own language, severely limiting a Gaelic culture and identity in the face of an emergent English cultural hegemony—the fundamental and primary means by which colonial subjects were conditioned with bourgeois, colonial ideology.

Whereas the death of the bardic tradition betrays the underpinnings of the English colonial project, the life of the bardic tradition signifies the social values which the English would ultimately curtail. Such values can only be thoroughly understood in the context of their production, however, and such a, “body of literature [was] produced mainly by men who were not primarily concerned with informing the future... [Such] is the richness of their work, its insouciance, its indifference to our needs, its decadent pursuit of its own survival.”¹⁶ One of the key points is that the mode of production for bardic poetry was very much occupied with its own moment—a historical record of sorts, without regard to its own being a historical record. Bardic poetry was produced for the economic sustenance of the poets themselves, who were predominantly men, and so bardic poetry was both essentially functional and masculine in nature. By extension, “bardic poets had long enjoyed considerable status and a relatively stable position in... the male homosocial world of elite Gaelic society,”¹⁷ and so such poets were also integrated into the elite strata of society—the nobility, the courts, and so on. The socioeconomic position of many bardic poets was one that both reproduced social values of the courts—through legitimizing the authority of leaders through devotional poetry—and maintained a literary tradition that is

¹⁶ O’Riordan, *Irish Bardic Poetry and Rhetorical Reality*, pp. xviii-xix

¹⁷ McKibben, *Endangered Masculinities in Irish Poetry*, p. 4

reserved for men, thereby implicitly reproducing patriarchal social values of and for the supposedly masculine sphere of literature.

During the immensely slow decline of the Irish language and the associated tradition of bardic poetry, bardic poets were not merely agents of reproducing gendered power dynamics of Irish society: bardic poets were, relative to looming English colonial infringements, major figures of preserving Gaelic culture and sovereignty in a historical, colonial scheme of cultural erasure. The philosopher and linguist Richard Rorty conceptualizes the integration of poetry and history as linked through the, “sense of human history as the history of successive metaphors [which] would let us see the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species.”¹⁸ This literary framing of history is especially befitting for the mutability inherent to the Irish language, whether it be through lenition, rendering multiple words into a new compound word, and so on; in the bardic tradition of Irish poetry, this mutability is contained within an extremely consistent and absolute structure, which forms the militant “vanguard” to both expand on and protect the language. The protection and preservation of the Irish language, culture and poetic tradition was a crucial endeavor in the face of English colonialism, but—apart from the prevalence of a colonially-oriented historiography—the bardic poet triumphs in cultural preservation in itself. For such; is the poet’s triumph. The claim to preserve the history of the lord’s family, to ensure immortality in the literary tradition is achieved in the precise generalities to which the formality of the composition gives shape... The enduring truth of...

¹⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 20

[which] is achieved by its basis in the physical landscape, the textual legacy on which it is built.¹⁹

O’Riordan’s central claim here is that cultural preservation is effectively historical preservation, both in the preservation of historical artifacts and the narrativization that such artifacts confer. Although such history is inextricably linked to a lord’s patronage (and thus does not necessarily depict any meaningful social history outside of this courtly context) O’Riordan excavates historical significance from bardic poetry that refers to Ireland herself. Of course, Ireland is politically related back to whichever lord to whom the poem is addressed, but the “physical landscape” nonetheless exists as the essential predicate to both the text and the socio-political relations of the lord. Such is a complicated gendered relationship: whereby Ireland is gendered as feminine and secondary to the masculine lord, and yet she is nonetheless figured as essential, the land itself.

Even throughout its slowly endured decline, bardic poetry effectively retained its form and function. As English colonialism became increasingly prevalent, however, the social function of bardic poetry oriented itself on its gendered power dynamics, and by extension, grappled with colonial power dynamics. In terms of its lasting form, O’Riordan claims that, “Irish bardic poetry has the literary enterprise... to have retained an anachronistic interest in outdated modes... Poets’ seeming engagement with changes in literary fashion... emanate principally from the contemporary political climate.”²⁰ In other words, Irish bardic poetry retained its form rather zealously, and only deviated into “literary fashion” for the sake of engaging in contemporary political discourse. As the

¹⁹ O’Riordan, *Irish Bardic Poetry and Rhetorical Reality*, p. 105

²⁰ O’Riordan, *Irish Bardic Poetry and Rhetorical Reality*, p. 250

political climate became severely challenged by the material and cultural violence of the English, bardic poetry became embedded in its tradition as ever, but reoriented its function. Rather than engage in politics in a passing “fashionable” manner or function to reproduce courtly social values, bardic poetry oriented itself to deal with poetry in a highly traditional manner to *absolutely* ensure the reproduction of courtly social values. In other words, the values of Irish poetic tradition and courtly values were challenged by the English colonial and cultural apparatus, and so bardic poets doubled into zeal to defend themselves. This conservative cultural approach denoted a particular modality of loss in the face of colonial violence—an attempt to impose traditional order in the face of contemporary disorder. This approach, then, sublated into a sense of colonial opposition, which, “helped spur bardic poets to assimilate new unifying terms and concepts to pre-existing literary and political frameworks to produce a nascent oppositional nationalist rhetoric.”²¹ From the overwhelming challenge of the curation of Irish culture, bardic poets felt compelled to adapt for the sake of survival.

This adaptation of traditional poetic forms for contemporary political purposes brings back two points: the “vanguard” of poets, and the epistemological disjunction inherent to attributing modern nationalist rhetoric to late-medieval poetry. In terms of the former, the poets’ adaptation to their broader political, linguistic, and cultural conditions to secure their poetic tradition certainly coheres to Rorty’s notion that the bardic poets could be their own “vanguards of the species.” In terms of the latter, the bardic poets pose a counterexample, in fact, for their work (in Fanon’s sense of a “contested culture”) was effectively nationalist in their insistence on Gaelic culture and complete rejection of English

²¹ McKibben, *Endangered Masculinities in Irish Poetry*, p. 38

influence. This “nationalism,” of course, does not neatly cohere to modern Irish nationalism for it was epistemologically particular to its historical instantiation.

Part Two: *An Táin Bó Cúailnge*—Queen Medb

Typically, in bardic encomia the cameo appearance of a female goddess figure representing the land served a crucial symbolic function. By her choice and sexual congress with a given ruler, she validated his appeal, legitimacy, and aspirations... Yet the central focus was clearly the lord, not the lady.²²

Ireland was the early modern exception in the realm of European gender relations in many ways, mainly through Breton law (although there are various historical disputes over the extent of Breton law’s application).²³ Even so, the poetic and political realms were largely patriarchal, and the symbolic presence of a Gaelic goddess— especially from the pantheon of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the trio of Ériu, Banba and Fódla²⁴—were byway personifications of the land itself. In any poem that pairs a lord with such an earthly goddess, McKibben argues that the “central focus was clearly the lord, not the lady,” and so the goddesses, powerful and emblematic of Ireland as they are, are merely political conduits of power for lords as opposed to being powerful themselves. In other words, the semiotic functionality of these goddesses is their mode of power; they are not powerful themselves, not because they do not exist in “reality,” but because their existence is

²² McKibben, *Endangered Masculinities in Irish Poetry*, p. 120

²³ Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, p. 6

²⁴ Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, pp. 7-8

subordinated to the reproduction of courtly power through poetry. Despite being the domain of myth and poetry, the semiotic subservience of women to the subjects of the lords is a compelling superstructural device for reproducing the power of local lords and the service of women, as they either marry into the court (“sexual congress with a given ruler...”) or presumably work the land. Indeed, goddesses of ancient and early modern mythos were often figured as deities of fertility, whether maternal or agricultural, wherein the former accorded well with “sexual congress” in the courts and the latter accorded well with the mundane nature of working the fields. In this sense, the mythological semiotics of the Tuatha Dé Danann can reproduce systems of class-oriented, gendered, and political stratifications of early modern Ireland.

The critique of poetry’s role in the social reproduction of these norms is certainly not new. The parodic poem “Cúirt an Mheán Oíche” was written in 1780 by Brian Merriman “is medieval in derivation, but its preoccupation with gender and genre produces a timely parodic response to contemporaneous and prior texts’ treatment of Irish manhood.”²⁵ At the time, writing in Irish was not a point of criticism but was rather the norm itself. The criticism, however, is using a poetic form to parody the overly wrought structures—which were inextricably both poetic and social—of medieval Ireland and Merriman’s own time. Such gendered criticisms which relate a past Ireland to a contemporaneous Ireland persist

²⁵ McKibben, *Endangered Masculinities in Irish Poetry*, p. 126

today, and academic work on the Ulster cycle²⁶ often focuses on figures such as Deirdre and Bhróin, Emer, the Scáthach,²⁷ and perhaps most importantly, Queen Medb.

Queen Medb's importance to the *Táin* is paramount: her stilted socioeconomic position holds the tension that initiates the narrative action of the *Táin*. To clarify, different editions of the *Táin* have different *rescéla*²⁸ to provide additional stories to lend background information for various characters and events. Different *rescéla* from different sources also provide different narrative details the core narrative arc of the cattle-raid begins with Queen Medb and King Ailill's "pillow conversation" in which they assess their respective material belongings. Certain *rescéla*, such as those that Ferguson accounts for in *The Irish Before the Conquest*, entertain Ailill's voice in the conversation far more than Medb's²⁹—such is an implicit denial of Medb's claims perpetrated by the narrator. The translation and arrangement of manuscripts addressed herein are those of Thomas Kinsella, whose work is lacking the patriarchal approach to the *Táin* that stains Ferguson's work, as well as others.³⁰

Their conversation, however, is not a simple account of possessions, but is rather a dynamic assessment of their respective material and political power. Ailill initiates the conversation, dismissing Medb's wealth prior to their marriage by telling her: "[Your]

²⁶ The Ulster Cycle is one of four epochs in classical and early modern Irish mythologized history. The Ulster cycle occurs roughly around the first century C.E., before Christianity and (arguably, but not likely) before the arrival of the Gaels in Ireland.

²⁷ Deirdre is a "Helen of Troy" figure, sought after by King Conchobar of Ulster for her beauty; Emer is Cúchulainn's eventual wife; the Scáthach is Cúchulainn's martial instructor.

²⁸ An Irish transliteration of the Latin *recensio*: an added revision for narrative context.

²⁹ Ferguson, *The Irish before the Conquest*, p. 45

³⁰ Kinsella mentions how the historian T. F. O'Rahilly believed that Medb was not a historical figure, but was rather a figurative, "tutelary goddess of Temair" (p. xiii). This is an interesting instance of taking source material figuratively, since O'Rahilly took the Annals of Ulster literally regarding the subject of St. Patrick being over 140 hundred years old.

wealth was something I didn't know or hear much about... except for your woman's things and the neighboring enemies making off with the loot and plunder."³¹ Aillil explicitly reduces the extent of Medb's material power to "woman's things" and the plunder of their enemies—either feminine or stolen. Aillil attempts to reduce Medb's position of power, believing the extent of her stature to be through her marital status as a woman and her lack of martial prowess; in the former, Medb's power is derived through *Aillil*, and in the latter, her material power is apparently drained by her lack of military power. Medb refutes him entirely, declaring his power to be through her own respective family and the extent of her militant standing, stating that she has:

the high king of Ireland for my father—Eochaid Feidlech... I outdid... [my siblings] in grace and giving and battle and warlike combat. I had fifteen hundred soldiers... [and] a whole province of Ireland... I asked a harder wedding gift than any woman ever asked before from a man in Ireland—the absence of meanness and jealousy and fear.³²

From her own familial and political ties, the high king of Ireland bestows Medb with Connacht for being the best of her siblings, especially in matters of "battle and warlike combat." As such, earning Connacht through her own martial ability substantiates and accords her power, but this land was still nonetheless bestowed, derived from her father Eochaid's power as high king in Leinster. In any case, it is not Aillil's own power and land; on the contrary, whatever stature Aillil enjoys as "king" of Connacht is derived from Medb, and not vice versa. De Beauvoir, a French philosopher, describes the kind of socioeconomic

³¹ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 52

³² Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 52-3

conditions of courtly marriage, especially in the broader ideological-cum-poetic conditions of the narrative, stating that, “While courtly love might ease woman’s lot, it does not modify it substantially. Ideologies... and poetry do not lead to female liberation.”³³ Medb closes her refutation with what is ostensibly a great compliment to Aillil: that he is the “only man in Ireland” who completely lacks “meanness and jealousy and fear.” Such is surely a compliment to Aillil’s personality, but it is only based on personality—and not political standing—that Medb marries Aillil. This is rather a signifier of Medb’s power: that she is already so powerful that she could marry for love, not power. What’s more, Medb seeks these personality traits in particular because they are necessary for a stable marriage with her; a jealous husband would teem with envy at the many men seeking Medb’s beauty, and a cowardly husband would not be able to partake in raids or combat with her. Ultimately, Medb can conduct the power dynamics of the marriage according to her own power and needs, which, in turn, only serves to further substantiate the basis of her political and familial power.

There is still the issue of Medb and Aillil’s material power, however. The one exception between the respective wealth of Medb and Ailill was the bull Finnenbach, who belonged to Ailill despite being a calf of one of Medb’s cows. Finnenbach, being a signifier of material power and masculinity given his immense size, “refused to be led by a woman... [and] had gone over to the king’s herd.”³⁴ Of course, this bull certainly has notions of his own to be so outright chauvinist, or perhaps the people of Connacht have no right to contest the gender-politics of a cow. In any case, a bull of equal standing is found— the

³³ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 112

³⁴ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 55

Donn Cúailnge, a bull belonging to Dáire of Cúailnge. After being indirectly insulted by a Connachian envoy sent to retrieve the bull (who insinuated that Medb would take the bull by force, if necessary)³⁵ Dáire refuses to give trade with Medb, thereby prompting Medb's invasion: the eponymous *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

Through most of the *Táin*, Medb, Aillil, and Fergus³⁶ occupy secondary narrative roles—secondary to Cúchulainn, who spends a majority of the narrative defeating the combatants sent by the trio. Their narrative presence rises back to prevalence at the end of the story, where the men of Ulster mobilize to fight the Connachians, after the curse of their birthing pains subsides.³⁷

By the end, however, Medb successfully retrieves the Donn Cúailnge with her army, and sets aside a rear guard to transport the bull safely: “Medb had set up a shelter of shields to guard the rear of the men of Ireland. She sent off the Brown Bull of Cúailnge to Cruachan... as she had sworn. Then she got her blood.”³⁸ In this instance, Medb is on the cusp of achieving her goal. The birthing pains subsided, the men of Ulster now press Medb before her victory; now, in an ironic narrative inversion to their birthing pains, Medb experiences a feminine vulnerability that conventionally signifies the *lack* of pregnancy. Whereas feminine pain had obstructed the men of Ulster, feminine pain now obstructs Medb from achieving victory herself. In any case, Medb assigns Fergus to the rear guard while she attends to her period, only to be discovered in such a vulnerable state by Cúchulainn: “‘Spare me,’ Medb said. ‘If I killed you dead,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘it would only be

³⁵ Ferguson, *The Irish before the Conquest*, pp. 46-7

³⁶ Fergus is the exiled king of Ulster before Conchobar and works with Medb and Aillil to reclaim Ulster for himself.

³⁷ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 206

³⁸ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 250

right.’ But he spared her, not being a killer of women. He watched them all the way westward until they passed Ath Luain.” Medb invades Ulster knowing the men of Ulster are subdued by the feminine vulnerability of birthing pains, and yet Cúchulainn does not make the same aggression, instead offering Medb mercy during her own state of feminine vulnerability. The narrative scheme of this scene depicts Cúchulainn as holistically powerful in his masculine capacity to kill her and his feminine offer of mercy. Perhaps given the constructed nature of the *Táin* from various manuscripts, or the different iterations of these manuscripts over time, this narrative scheme is somewhat jarring. Indeed, his mercy is grounded in his not being “a killer of women,” and yet he swears to kill Medb earlier in the *Táin* and accidentally explodes the head of a woman he mistakes for Medb³⁹—hardly a merciful or compassionate gesture. In any case, Medb succeeds in directing the Donn Cúailnge away from battle—and so the battle ends, but not because of the attainment of Medb’s objective.

Rather, the men of Ulster successfully defeat the Connachian army—Medb achieves her personal goal at the cost of her army’s loss. Looking over the soldiers, Medb and Fergus know that the, “battle was over. Medb said to Fergus: ‘We have had shame and shambles here today, Fergus.’ ‘We followed the rump of a misguiding woman,’ Fergus said. ‘ It is the usual thing for a herd led by a mare to be strayed and destroyed.’”⁴⁰Medb explicitly states the extent of her failure; the haughty Fergus returns the reason for such failure: being a “misguiding woman.” Fergus has the last two spoken lines of the *Táin*, this criticism of Medb as a “misguiding” woman being the penultimate. As such, Fergus’s criticism of Medb’s

³⁹ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 138

⁴⁰ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 251

disastrous leadership sears into the last memories of the audience, retaining greater cultural memory for such a passing moment. Indeed, this instance of the *Táin* explicitly reproduces the politico-cultural superstructure of medieval Irish patriarchy, even with relatively powerful and sovereign women as Medb. Medb's power, however, is essentially reduced to this single failure, despite her figure otherwise teeming with political stature and martial prowess. The narrative concludes with the victory of Ulster, implicitly suggesting that a model for a more formidable strength lies within the victor's ranks: with the Hound of Ulster, Cúchulainn.

Part Three: *An Táin Bó Cúailnge*—Sétanta, Cúchulainn

The rest of the poem catalogues a near-total collective failure on the part of the addressed lords... 'ni fhuil diobh i gcruth duine / in Eirinn uile an t-amsa' ('there is not in all Ireland at this time one person in the shape of a man'), indeed a sweeping indictment.⁴¹

Bardic poetry was old enough to be transcribed into the various manuscripts that now constitute the various renditions of the *Táin*. As such, it is not altogether surprising that—as the *Táin* was continually rewritten over time—the anxieties and themes that the *Táin* is fraught with would continually appear in bardic poetry well until its end. The above excerpt is McKibben's work, who cites a bardic poet critical of the inaction of local Irish lords regarding the Norman invaders. The poet exacts his criticism by stating that none of

⁴¹ McKibben, *Endangered Masculinities in Irish Poetry*, p. 15

them, nor anyone in Ireland, is “in the shape of a man,” acutely cutting into their sense of masculinity and political stature in tandem. In a broader sense, the poet historically records a sense of a lost masculinity in Ireland—a martial inability that is derives from masculine impotence. These bardic poets, concerned with the defense of Ireland and the masculinity thereof, gradually sought new artistic muses of manhood aside from their patrons, the lords.

Just as bardic poetry was transcribed onto the manuscripts that were compiled into various renditions of the *Táin*, so too was bardic poetry intertextual, laced into a complex weave of allusions; through allusions to the *Táin* and the Ulster Cycle more broadly, then, bardic poets of the twelfth century and beyond could reproduce their conceptualizations of martial masculinity. McKibben cites another poet, who—in his anxieties about military losses—grounds his understanding of Ireland in the poetic history that offers a sense of military might, stating;

Do sgarsat linn leath ar leath, / oig Laighean, laochraidh Mhuinmhneach, / tread
froachlann mhuighe Meadhbha / ‘s cuire soarchlann seinEamhna... They have
dispersed from us in all directions, / the young warriors of Leinster, the heroes of
Munster, / the fierce-bladed denizens of Maeve’s plain [Connacht], / and ancient
Eamhain’s [Ulster’s] warband of noble race.”⁴²

Although McKibben’s translation is especially effective in its use of “dispersed” to signify the routing and displacement of Irish forces, “leath ar leath” can otherwise signify “half by half,” denoting how severely divided the Irish are. McKibben’s translation is otherwise more effective in the broader schema of this excerpt, for the Irish were sent in, “all

⁴² McKibben, *Endangered Masculinities in Irish Poetry*, p. 53

directions,” namely to the other provinces of Ireland. Thus, not only are the Irish geographically dispelled but they are also cast back into the histories which they can fall back on for historico-poetic support, if not material or martial support. As they retreat to the plains of “Maeve” and “ancient Emhain,” the speaker suggests a cultural retreat back into a past that affirms Irish military might—an affirmation for a possible victory in the future. Ultimately, McKibben depicts two key anxieties of the bardic poets in times of military strife: that military loss betrays a loss of masculinity and identity, which, in turn, directs the Irish cultural consciousness towards the historico-poetic past which returns this sense of masculinity and martial competence.

These sought-after elements are singularly embodied in the chief protagonist of the *Táin*, Cúchulainn. Immensely powerful, Cúchulainn is figured as, “the *preux chevalier* of Irish chivalrous story... [and] possessed every quality of mind and body proper, in the estimation of our ancestors, for a perfect heroic character.”⁴³ He is a fundamentally “Irish” figure in several ways. Inasmuch as Ireland is imagined as being accordant with nature, “the birth of Cú Chulainn” being “contemporaneous with the birth of a mystical horse” signifies a mystical, natural orientation of the Irish figure with Ireland herself. Cúchulainn also aligns with the national imagination of Ireland as “feminine” through his mother, since her being the king’s sister suggests, “ a system of matrilineal descent in Ireland.”⁴⁴ Imbued with the power of a demi-god, Cúchulainn’s power primarily derives from his “ríastarthaé” or “warped rage,” in which “the warrior’s moon” takes over his body, warping him into an agent of absolute destruction.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ferguson, *The Irish before the Conquest*, p. 48

⁴⁴ Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, p. 131

⁴⁵ Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, pp. 136-7

The *Táin*'s readership is subject to gregarious exposition on how handsome, strong, and utterly violent Cúchulainn is, yet some of the most telling and least explicit exposition rings in poetic form from the Morrígan.⁴⁶ After a sequence of successful single combats against Medb's champions, Cúchulainn's presence looms over Ireland. Celebrating such violence, the Morrígan extols Cúchulainn's feats in extremely foreboding terms: "On the plains war / grinding heroic / hosts to dust / cattle groans the Badb / the raven ravenous / among corpses of men / affliction and outcry / and war everlasting / raging over Cúailnge / death of sons / death of kinsmen / death death!"⁴⁷ Cúchulainn's presence on the battlefield is immense. He is a single figure that reduces the "heroic hosts" of Medb into "dust," indicating that his destructive faculties alone supersede those of an army. Although such destruction is the work and will of the Morrígan, the violence is a fundamental rending of nature, manifested in "cattle groans" and ravens feasting "among corpses of men." As a pedantic note regarding translation, "Badb" is the form of a crow that the Morrígan takes. Since "Badb" and "raven" have long "A" sounds followed by a "V" sound, Kinsella likely chose "raven" instead of "crow" for the assonance; this assonance that connects the Morrígan with the feasting ravens, then, imbues the goddess' presence into the feasting ravens, permeating the Morrígan's power across the torn battles that Cúchulainn leaves behind. The Morrígan's declaration is almost eulogic in nature, both praising the destruction and death that has been wrought, and this culminates in the last few lines—the anaphoric "death." The lines "death of sons" and "death of kinsmen" and

⁴⁶ The Morrígan is a "goddess" figure of death, warfare, and prophecy, and manifests into one of three forms accordingly. She can shape-shift into different animals, and otherwise influences animals to sow chaos.

⁴⁷ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 98

structurally parallel for their anaphora of “death,” their syntactical reflection, and their enjambed, adjacent lines. This poetic structure, however, is undercut by the very chaos that it posits and celebrates. This chaos comes to a head in the last line: “death death!” There is an invisible caesura between each iteration of “death,” an extended space that subverts both conventionally syntactical structure and the repeated structures of the previous two lines. The caesura, then, is the void that encloses the last structures of the poem, rendering all sense of order secondary to death.

As such, the Morrígan’s objective is clear, and so—in the middle of Cúchulainn’s long sequence of fighting Medb’s forces—the Morrígan approaches Cúchulainn to further augment his violent propensities. Their encounter is somewhere between laughably awkward and casually misogynist, which Kinsella accounts as such:

Cúchulainn beheld... a young woman of noble figure... ‘I am King Buan’s daughter,’ she said, ‘and I have brought you my treasure and cattle. I love you because of the great tales I have heard.’ ‘You come at a bad time... I can’t attend to a woman during a struggle like this.’ ‘But I might be a help.’ ‘It wasn’t for a woman’s backside that I took on this ordeal!’ ‘Then I’ll hinder,’ she said.⁴⁸

The Morrígan poses as a courtly woman with gifts and (rather direct) declarations of love. Cúchulainn callously curtails whatever the Morrígan plans, however, for he fixates on the “struggle” of combat rather than her. As such, social signifiers of power mean nothing to Cúchulainn—neither “treasure” nor “cattle” hold appeal, despite both of which being the very incipient factors of the *Táin*. Even the implicit promise of courtly life through marriage to “King Buan’s daughter” is not even considered. Cúchulainn’s rejection of

⁴⁸ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 133

aspirational power only substantiates his power and gravitas further, much like Medb's rejection of aspirational marriage at the beginning of the narrative. By insulting her offer of help, however, Cúchulainn effectively invites her to "hinder" his efforts in the future.

This promise of hindrance ultimately benefits the Morrígan's no matter what: whether Cúchulainn prevails against her or not, chaos and violence still prevail. The Morrígan eventually exacts her revenge during Cúchulainn's fight with Medb's men, specifically during his fight with Bricriu mac Carbad. Bricriu is a seasoned veteran who would not fight Cúchulainn until he becomes a grown man, and so Cúchulainn deceives Bricriu by putting mud on his face to seem like a beard that a grown man would have.⁴⁹ During their fight, however, Bricriu taunts Cúchulainn, for the Morrígan takes the form of an eel and ensnares Cúchulainn: "It's a pity you took on a hero's task, with all the men of Ireland looking on."⁵⁰ The underlying pretense of this moment is that Cúchulainn is "man" enough to fight Bricriu for having a mud-beard, an artificial projection of masculinity for Cúchulainn to substantially prove his masculinity against Bricriu in combat. Bricriu's taunting spurns Cúchulainn's attempt at a "hero's task," especially with the surrounding "men of Ireland" watching. In literal terms, the "men of Ireland" are Bricriu's men; and yet, the phrase "men of Ireland" broadens the scope of the audience to the whole of Ireland—and indeed, the readership, as active onlookers, also assume the role of judges to Cúchulainn. In other words, Bricriu challenges both Cúchulainn's masculinity *and* the historico-poetic account thereof, exhorting the audience to judge for themselves. Cúchulainn's response is, as usual, violent, tangible, and immediate, as he, "rose up at this

⁴⁹ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 130

⁵⁰ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 133

[provocation] and struck the eel and smashed its ribs. Then... the [nearby] cattle stampeded madly eastward through the army... Next a she-wolf attacked Cúchulainn and drove the cattle back westward upon him.”⁵¹ At the instance where Cúchulainn almost disproves Bricriu by dispelling the eel, the Morrígan—a more feminine counterpoint to Bricriu—continues her vengeance on Cúchulainn by spurring cattle-stampedes and transforming into a she-wolf. She instills complete chaos into nature, effectively transmuting the natural state of Cúchulainn’s world into chaos. Bricriu’s masculine taunting pales in comparison to the feminine wrath that the Morrígan rends, suggesting that a feminine entity—such as Medb—might ultimately triumph through sheer power and manipulation of the natural world (especially a manipulation of cattle). In any case, the Morrígan achieves her own goal of sowing death through her intervention in Cúchulainn’s fight.

After a prolonged fight with both Medb’s men and the Morrígan’s untaming of nature, Cúchulainn emerges victorious, but not triumphant. Exhausted and alone, he issues a poetic lamentation that poses a counterpoint to the Morrígan’s ode to war and death, as he shouts into the night;

I am alone against hordes. / I can neither halt nor let pass. / I watch through the long hours / alone against all men. // Tell Conchobor to come now. / It wouldn't be too soon. / Mágach's sons have stolen our cattle/ to divide between them... I am almost worn out / by single contests. / I can't kill all their best / alone as I am.⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 136

The opening line strikes the overarching sentiment of his declaration: an alienation that is exacerbated by the “hordes” that he faces alone. Whether it be Medb’s armies or the weight of nature that the Morrígan commands, Cúchulainn alone bears all of existence as resistance against him. By extension, the task of guarding Ulster casts any stranger as a potential enemy, restricting his agency to the exclusively warlike state wherein he “can neither halt nor let pass.” As such, the whole of Ulster lies at his back, constantly pressing him into an exhaustive vigil, even stunting any chance at sleep “through the long hours” of his watch.⁵³ The exhaustion and sense of alienation builds, then, as Cúchulainn exhorts Conchobor to come as soon as possible, regarding his sheer vulnerability in his total loneliness alongside the need to alleviate both. The stolen cattle that the Connachians “divide between” themselves is a loss of material goods for Ulster; this material loss confers a figurative division between the men of Ulster as they are weakened by these cattle raids, as does this division reinforces the social division and overall alienation that Cúchulainn voices here. Ultimately, Cúchulainn repeats his sense that he is too “worn out” and “alone” to “kill all their best,” further cementing his sense of vulnerability and alienation given the circumstances. This emotional openness and plea for assistance does not necessarily register with modern epistemological frameworks of “masculinity.” Whether or not it resonated or jarred against medieval Irish conceptualizations of masculinity, this instance at least imbues Cúchulainn with more humane aspects amid all the killing, both through his reasonable assessment of his own capabilities and his consequent calls for help. Given his otherwise “masculine” feats of victory over Medb’s armies, then, it is possible that this

⁵³ Kinsella notes several times that Cúchulainn does not “need” sleep like regular humans but is nonetheless exhausted after so much fighting.

reasonable expression of vulnerability also confers onto a Irish medieval epistemology of masculinity since Cúchulainn is already the epitome of masculine feats. Either way, his overly masculine condescension to the Morrígan and his goading of Briciu directly facilitates his own exhaustion, and so this narrative scheme suggests a cautionary approach to warlike and otherwise masculine conduct.

Conclusion: History, Land, Narrative, and Viscera

*'It would look bad,' Fergus said, 'to get this quarrelsome calf only so far, only to have him throw away the honour of his kind. Men have died on both sides because of you.'*⁵⁴

By the end of the *Táin*, there is an extremely ambiguous “success” for Medb’s cattle raid. Indeed, as Fergus admonishes Medb that men “have died on both sides because of” her, the ultimate destruction exacted and the power dynamics established do not cast a clear “winner.” Cúchulainn and the men of Ulster ultimately win the final battle, and Medb and Aillil make peace with Ulster. Medb successfully captures the Donn Cúailnge, and publicly presents the bull’s strength against Aillil’s bull, Finnenbach, where “the men of Ireland saw the Donn Cúailnge coming westward past Cruachan with the mangled remains of Finnenbach hanging from his horns.”⁵⁵ Medb loses the battle against Ulster, but she still achieves her initial objectives of both attaining the bull and superseding Aillil’s material

⁵⁴ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 251

⁵⁵ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 252

power in a raw and direct manner. The Donn Cúailnge, however, bearing Finnenbach's "loins, shoulderblade, and liver" on his horns, does not join Medb's ranks, and he instead; went to his own land. He went to drink in Finnlethe... [and] left Finnenbach's shoulderblade there—from which comes Finnlethe, the White One's Shoulderblade, as the name of that district... Then he went on until he fell dead between Ulster and Uí Echach at Druim Tairb. So Druim Tairb, the Ridge of the Bull, is the name of that place.⁵⁶

The phrase "his own land" suggests that the whole of Ireland belongs to him, that his power and presence is so immense that it commands the very land, the whole of nature. Whereas Medb commands a fourth of Ireland, and the Morrígan commands nature against Cúchulainn, the Donn Cúailnge oddly commands the entirety of that which is out of both Medb and Cúchulainn's reach: Ireland as a whole, and the natural beauty that constitutes her. He takes a tour of his land, and the land takes names according to his actions—Finnlethe being one of many examples. Leaving the viscera of Finnenbach behind, the Donn Cúailnge marks his victory over Finnenbach while imbuing his presence into the land itself, as reflected in the place-names that honor and reflect his actions. However, the bull finally falls dead at Druim Tairb due to his fight with Finnenbach, and as the very reason for the *Táin's* violence—the blood across Ulster strewn and lost by Cúchulainn, the men who have "died on both sides" in the last battle, and the viscera of Finnenbach across Ireland— he dies himself.

The narrative closes and Medb's temporary victory of proving her power closes as well. Although her bull slays Aillil's, her own bull dies too; she does not supersede Aillil's

⁵⁶ Kinsella, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 252

material power, but rather circuitously reaches equilibrium with him. Fergus's admonition of Medb might suggest that Medb essentially fails, inasmuch as the cattle raid wastes the lives of many men. Medb's attainment of the Donn Cúailnge also signifies her success however, and the bull's visceral marking of Ireland is a yet another tangible signifier of Medb's success. By imbuing the land with tangible artifacts of his presence, the Donn Cúailnge's tour of Ireland signals Medb's temporary success, and, ultimately, the very poetico-historical narrative of the whole *Táin*.

Thus, the continued retelling of the *Táin* derives from the various manuscripts and translations, surely, but also through the material manifestation of such a narrative. Given the widespread recognition of the *Táin*'s fundamentally mythological aspect, the present-day markers of the narrative twists against the mythological framing; both mythological and material, then, then *Táin* sublates its own mythological and historically material aspects, producing an entity that is dialectically synthesized as both: a historico-poetic narrative. The delineation between "material history" and "artificial mythology" becomes integrated and relatively indiscernible, facilitating meaningful conceptualizations of Irish history, culture, and identity that are polyvalent in their material and mythological framing. Whether it be the national imagination of Ireland as a woman through the Tuatha Dé Danann or Queen Medb, the role of men acting like Cúchulainn inasmuch as they fight against immeasurable odds and their own alienation, the past—both historical and mythological— is a metric for later Irish epistemological and ontological conditions.

The extent to which these conditions are derived from the *Táin* in the twentieth century are reflected in the very resurgence of the text in its many forms: through the

Gaelic Revival and the work of Lady Gregory and Yeats in the early twentieth century,⁵⁷ and, of course, Kinsella's own translation in 1969. Although the twentieth century translations and reworkings of the *Táin* belie certain modern pretenses—epistemological approaches to gender, ontological conceptualizations of the nation-state, and so on—the inverse is also true; through translation, these medieval texts can condition modern understandings of Ireland, especially since their “medieval” nature confers an authority through age, alongside a perceived sense of what is essentially “Irish” when some narrative aspect—such as the gendered disputes throughout the *Táin*—resonate across time.

⁵⁷ Gregory, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, pp. 11-7

Chapter 2—Twentieth Century Historico-Poetics: Yeats, Boland, and Poetic Narrativization

Introduction

[The] atmosphere of myths and magic operates like an undeniable reality... it incorporates me into the land and traditions of my ethnic group, but at the same time I am reassured and granted a civil status, an identification. The secret sphere in underdeveloped countries is a collective sphere that falls exclusively within the realm of magic.⁵⁸

The beginning of the twentieth century in the Kingdom of Ireland was fraught with a matrix of disjunctions; such disjunctions were between notions of ‘modernity’ (and, by extension, material development) and preserving Gaelic culture, as well as political disjunctions pertaining to unionism, Home Rule, and—as embodied by the 1916 Easter Uprising—republicanism.⁵⁹ Of course, tensions over modernity and the preservation of Gaelic culture are directly related to political tensions over Ireland’s place in the United Kingdom; indeed, being British was conceptualized as thoroughly modern in its connotations of industry and empire, whereas being Irish was, conversely, conceptualized as making moral and even mystical virtues out of a sheer lack of industry and empire. As such, early twentieth century Irish perceptions of what constituted a distinctly Irish culture are embedded in the overly and overtly mystical musings of Yeats’s poetry. By contrast,

⁵⁸ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 18

⁵⁹ Coogan, pp. 36-7

such questionable (and, occasionally fascist-adjacent)⁶⁰ exhortations to abide by an Irish mysticism are deconstructed by numerous Irish writers later in the twentieth century (such as the coterie of Muldoon, Kavanagh, and Heaney) and one of the most effective at this project of deconstruction was Eavan Boland. The extent of Yeats's mystical musings, however, is only substantial insofar as it is the extent that they appear in his poems: they are not holistically indicative of Yeats's politico-historical imagination. Even so, Boland's critical poetry functions to deconstruct Yeats's unquestioning deference to symbols and legends of a vague and broad history of ancient Ireland, and how such deference fails to render a meaningful imagination of Irish identity.

Although there are plenty of valuable writers in the latter half of the twentieth century to compare to Yeats, Boland's voice is analytically precise while integrating the personal with the historical, effectively constituting a "feminine" historical voicing. This "feminine" grounding to Irish history counters the often-masculine voicing in Yeats's poetry. Since Irish mythology, such as the *Táin*, is both prominently masculine and feminine, any approach to the broader spectra of mythology can lean into either: these two writers can offer one of each, so to speak. As Yeats develops poetically throughout his life (as his poetic imagination of Ireland develops and mutates in tandem) his fervent deference to mythology in the 1890's becomes a severe grappling with the harsh realities of colonial violence that surrounds him. Whereas Yeats seriously and critically questions his imagined Ireland after 1916, Boland (with the hindsight of history and the position of having lived in England) offers critical insight into the British colonial apparatus that Yeats

⁶⁰ Both questionable in its internal inconsistencies (not writing *as Gaelige* to represent an *épistémè* wholly different from a modern, English speaking Ireland, the lack of historicity in mythology) *and* for its ideological resonance with fascism.

grapples with. In conjunction, Yeats's and Boland's historico-poetic approach to the relationship between Irish mythology and British colonialism offers a more personal, emotionally compelling narrative to history—how history can moreover be an affectation of personal loss—that can supplement more conventional means of historical analysis.

Through the narrative mode of poetry, both Yeats and Boland are concerned with the revival and deconstruction (respectively) of politico-historical narratives about Ireland. In this considerably broader scope of narrative functionality, narrative becomes, “the formative structure linking collective memory to individual identity... the cognitive instrument that combines history and ideology into volatile political compounds of amazingly enduring force.”⁶¹ The unifying nature of narrative is therefore a means of consigning groups of people to historical and ideological frameworks that, in turn, engender political action and belief. As such, poetic narratives may seem like a tangential account of history, but—given its poetic aspects that frame and depict history in particular ways—poetry affords its own modality of history, ideology, and politics.

Part One—The Blood of *Ériu*: A “Poetic” Narrative of Loss

*I am afraid... you, as an Irishman, cannot escape from your blood, nor from our blood-music that brings the racial character to mind. Irish poetry remains a creation... fundamentally rooted in rural civilization...*⁶²

⁶¹ Dutka, p. 80

⁶² F.R. Higgins, cited in ‘Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry,’ p. 38

This excerpt from a letter, written by the poet F.R. Higgins to another Irish poet, Louis MacNiece, views poetry and musicality as being literally imbued in the blood of Irish people, as does it locate such poetic musicality in “rural civilization.” Seamus Heaney states that this letter is relatively innocuous in its own time (the late 1920’s) but takes on a fascist tone with its appeals to an idealized, rustic Ireland populated by those who are ethnically disposed to be great cultural producers. Where, however, does this idea of Ireland come from, and what are its implications for the historico-poetic imagination of Ireland?

Although there are many answers, one possible source of such an idea derives from the mythologizing of the 1798 Irish Freeman’s Rebellion through the Limerick “The Wind that Shakes the Barley.” Given that Irish guerillas could never settle down and set up camp, they would carry oats and barley on them to eat; if they were killed and buried en masse, then the “croppy holes” where they were buried would eventually become barley fields. This phenomenon took on poetic pertinence through the limerick. Beginning with two lovers about to leave one another as the man plans to join the Irish Freeman, the woman is suddenly shot, strengthening the resolve of the young rebel who, controlling the narrative voice of the poem, declares:

But blood for blood without remorse / I've ta'en at Oulart Hollow, / And placed my true love's clay-cold corpse / Where I full soon will follow; / And round her grave I wander drear, / Noon, night and morning early, / With breaking heart whene'er I hear /The wind that shakes the barley!⁶³

The phrase “blood for blood” indicates a past of violence (the speaker has “ta’en” blood) but it also betrays a continual cycle of violence, whereby blood can only beget more blood.

⁶³ Dwyer Joyce, “The Wind that Shakes the Barley,” p. 340

Interestingly, the speaker had already planned to leave his lover to join the Irish Freeman, yet he now frames his own struggle in terms of *her* blood after the fact; without her death, he would have still fought, but her death lends him a more compelling narrative to fight. Even so, this narrative of a cyclical entity is rather pervasive in “narratives of the nation in Irish popular history... [which] took the form of an endless—or tragic—deferral of an ending.”⁶⁴ This poem’s narrative underpinnings therefore resonate with a wider corpus of Irish culture⁶⁵ that entails the tragically endless: it happens that the “tragically endless” herein is ceaseless colonial violence. The speaker describes the woman’s “clay-cold corpse” with an alliterative phrase that binds the cold clay to her corpse—and so the earth and her body becomes one. The imagining of the land as a feminine entity is widespread in Irish literature and it is certainly tied to the eponymous Gaelic goddess Ériu, for whom Ireland is named:⁶⁶ this nomenclature derives from the Tuatha Dé Danann, denoting a tie to a broader, ostensibly coherent history. The young rebel believes that he will “soon follow” his love to the grav, and so he fights for inanimate entities—his dead lover, the land that she is intertwined with, the idea of Ireland that a feminine landscape encapsulates—so that he might join them.

Not only does the rebel promote a sense of cyclical violence, then, but he also abides by an overwhelming death drive to impart death to his enemies and to himself. Such a death drive, however, is self-justifying inasmuch as it is also tied to a historical sense of

⁶⁴ Gibbons, “Narratives of the Nation: Fact, Fiction, and Irish Cinema” in *Theorizing Ireland*, p. 73

⁶⁵ Not that Irish culture is holistically focused on history of colonialism, merely that it is a prevalent topic.

⁶⁶ Or after which *Éire* is named, since the goddess’ name more closely resembles the Irish language name for Ireland than the English name.

cyclical justice. In this sense, the “wind that shakes the barley” is a continual reminder of the land that his corpse will return to and which will subsume his corpse to feed another generation of rebels. What do all these interrelated poetic elements amount to? The appeal to an ancient, mythic, “authentically Gaelic”⁶⁷ Ireland is the construction of a specific mode of viewing Ireland. This this historical imagination derives from a broader Irish colonial history; in a dialectically materialist view, one whereby Ireland, as a colonial subject, never quite industrially developed, Ireland never had the material means for a revolution that could exact a sovereign state against the great British Empire. This poem, then, constitutes an ideology of loss, one that both copes with the loss that Ireland has suffered by framing Ireland as a mystical, beautiful woman whom one can die for, and as a means of mitigating death, for one’s death will be subsumed by the barley and consumed by the next generation of revolutionaries. As such, this poem posits an ideological framework that copes with the overwhelming loss of colonial violence and material retardation by preparing for a continued historical cycle of resistant violence.

The prevailing effects of this “ideology of loss” that is clearly rendered in reference to the Irish Freeman’s Rebellion of 1798 is clearly historico-poetic: the conjunction between history and poetry distorts both, possibly allowing ideological reification of both history and culture. Eavan Boland—a prominent Irish poet of the latter half of the 20th century—deconstructs that specific narrative of a mythologized Ireland and the cyclical violence that accompanies it through her poem “Story.” Written in 1994, Boland’s poem

⁶⁷ Interestingly, contemporary ideas of some ethnically pure vision of Ireland often appeal to a pan-Celtic culture as opposed to a Gaelic culture, reflecting the early modern invention of “Celtic culture” as opposed to there being a historical base (albeit skewed) in Gaelic culture; either way, there is ahistorical reframing of some invented, mystical race.

implicitly regards “The Wind that Shakes the Barley” by framing a parallel metanarrative of two lovers hiding from their oppressors.⁶⁸ The metanarrative aspect of the poem, however, stresses the woman’s role in the construction of the myth (and the personal affect thereof, from Boland’s feminine voice) and how such a mythologized view of Ireland still resonates in the 20th century. Indeed, Boland’s poem denotes the historically contingent links between the 1798 Freeman’s Rebellion, the violent context of her own time during The Troubles, and the various periods of colonial violence and strife in between.

“Story” focuses on the woman’s neglected role in the narrative function of “The Wind that Shakes the Barley” despite the woman’s central role in the perception of Ireland as a feminine land; rather, the focus of the myth is on the man’s fight, for which the woman is merely the justification and not the *raison d’être*. Boland inserts herself as the speaker of the poem, and, referring to the woman of the myth, states; “And let the woman be slender. As I was at twenty. /And red-haired. As I was until recently./... [The lovers] have no idea / how much of this: the ocean-coloured peace // of the dusk, and the way legend stresses it, / depend on her to be young and beautiful.”⁶⁹ Boland refers to the red-haired beauty of the woman and the “ocean-coloured peace of the dusk” as essential elements of the “legend.” These elements are surely essential since the ideology of loss needs men to die for an Ireland of beautiful nature and natural beauty. In particular, “red-haired” women are a

⁶⁸ Seamus Heaney’s poem “Requiem for the Croppies” is also an important poetic parallel to this limerick. Although a direct comparison between the two is unquestionably valuable, a comparative reading would essentially be a summary of other, more intelligent comparative readings. Boland’s “Story” is also incredibly valuable in this comparative reading, but perhaps less discursively prevalent. In any case, “Requiem for the Croppies” appears in Chapter 3, and affords different comparative significance in the context of that chapter.

⁶⁹ Boland, “Story” p. 61

common trope of quintessentially “Irish” beauty; coupled with the exhortative “let,” the woman of the poetic myth embodies “Irish” characteristics such as red-hair to sublimate the figure of the woman into the essence of Ireland. Boland’s self-insertion further complicates the narrative function of the mythologized woman for she states that she was also “slender” and “red-haired... until recently.” In the narrative sublation of the woman into the abstract notion of “Ireland” and Irish identity, where is there space for Boland in an Ireland that can no longer conflate her with “Irishness” given that she is not “young and beautiful” anymore? Thus, Boland implicitly questions the function of a mythologized Ireland that, in its specific rendering of womanhood, somehow renders Boland outside of a definition of Irishness. Given how “The Wind that Shakes the Barley” frames an Irish history of cyclical violence, Boland examines how such an imagined Ireland would even imagine peace; surely enough, “peace” is intertwined with the nature-imagery of an idyllic, rustic Ireland, as Boland relates how the story places peace at “dusk” and is described as “ocean-coloured.” Overall, Boland critiques the political narrative and myth present in “The Wind that Shakes the Barley” inasmuch as it reduces womanhood to a mere sublated facet of Irish statehood. In other words, this historico-poetic imagination of Ireland refuses to imagine women as anything other than functionally useful for the imagination of Ireland, instead of imagining women as inherently valuable in a tangible, lived-in Ireland.

Boland concludes “Story” by “writing this woman out of legend,” thereby imagining a complete suspension of the whole narrative and how difficult it will be to replace it: to replace the historical contingency it rests on, to replace the violence that conditioned it and which it perpetuates in turn. Boland imagines the events of the myth herself and declares

that; “what is happening is... travelling... [to] a table at which I am writing. I am writing // a woman out of legend. I am thinking / how new it is—this story. How hard it will be to tell.”⁷⁰ Boland effectively personalizes the poem and mythos of “The Wind that Shakes the Barley” by situating the narrative through the “table at which” Boland writes, thereby making it her own. This personalization grounds the withering mythology of “The Wind that Shakes the Barley” in immediate, material experience. Boland’s extrication of the woman from this narrative is “new” since it detaches from the sequence of historically contingent events and narratives which conditioned such mythologization of Ireland. Consequently, Boland consciously presents herself with the “hard” task of constructing new narratives that deconstruct and critique the old, prevailing narratives. As such, Boland constructs a metanarrative around the narrative of “The Wind that Shakes the Barley” to critique its patriarchal and overly-abstracted framework of history, yet Boland also laments the difficulties inherent in implementing a meaningful historical narrative in lieu of such mythological narratives. Ultimately, Boland’s difficulty signifies the engrained nature of history in Irish culture and how difficult it is to circumvent.

Overall, the narrative underpinnings of “The Wind that Shakes the Barley” propagate cyclical violence against colonial power without necessarily deconstructing such colonial power: it is an endless fight of preserving abstract notions of dignity and masculinity, especially as Ireland is conceptualized as a woman worth defending. Conversely, Boland affords insight into the overly mythologized view of such a narrative, and analyzes how its component parts—the idolatry of a rustic landscape, the utilization of

⁷⁰ Boland, “Story” p. 61-2

a nameless woman for political ends—play into another cyclical aspect: the perennial and perpetual vision of a conservative Ireland, where the land does not change and the women remain tangential afterthoughts to the larger picture. Indeed, Boland depicts how this “narration had a direct connection to endangering the lives of the second generation, those who received the narratives.”⁷¹ Thus, the cyclical nature of such narratives manifest in the very telling of the narratives, thereby securing a continual, contingent imagination of a conservative, unchanging Ireland.

Part Two—Yeats and Boland: Narratives and Meta-Narratives of Ireland

*The light of dawn is the true, primordial light. Each time I observe it, I bless my sleepless nights, which affords me an occasion to witness the spectacle of the Beginning. Yeats calls it ‘sensuous’—a fine discovery, and anything but obvious.*⁷²

In his earlier years at the end of the nineteenth century, Yeats imagined a ‘true, primordial’ Ireland that existed at the very beginning of existence itself.⁷³ As is common enough, such an Ireland is imagined as a woman, for the land of Éire⁷⁴ is named after the ancient Gaelic goddess for whom it refers.⁷⁵ Indeed, such an imagination of Ireland was held by Pádraig Pearse, one of the martyrs of the Easter Uprising, who also had a ‘religiose

⁷¹ Dutka, p. 96

⁷² Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations*, p. 115

⁷³ Yeats’s political imagination was dynamic, of course, and this poem only represents an instantiation of his own vision.

⁷⁴ For the sake of distinctions, “Éire” will refer to an imagined mystical Ireland, whereas “Ireland” would otherwise refer to the state(s) or the geographical island.

⁷⁵ Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, pp. 7-8

devotion' to the 'myth of Ireland as a spiritual entity';⁷⁶ as such, the mythology that is presented in Yeats's poetry is central to a certain strain of republicanism during 1916.

In Yeats's poem "To Ireland in the Coming Times," Yeats depicts a spiritual conjunction of Ireland with a Gaelic goddess, whose inception occurs at the very beginning of time itself. Yeats explicitly integrates this imagined history with the artifice of his poetry, especially when he describes how; "the red-rose-bordered hem / Of her, whose history began / Before God made the angelic clan, / Trails all about the written page. / When time began... [it] Made Ireland's heart begin to beat; / And Time bade all his candles flare / To light a measure here and there."⁷⁷ Ireland is not initially described in direct terms, for she is synecdochally referred to through her "red-rose-bordered hem," as if Ireland is divine to the extent of resisting description or being seen directly. The compounded, hyphenated phrase "red-rose-bordered hem" is self-contained in several ways, whether it be the many assonant sounds (such as the "R," "D," short "e" and long "O" sounds) or the unifying hyphens; as a phrase which synecdochally refers to Ireland, this phrase's structural elements also belies the imagined nature of Ireland: beautiful in its assonance, unitary and coherent in its phrasing. Of course, the literal meaning of the phrase refers to the hem of some article of clothing that is decorated with red roses. The "safe" interpretation of this phrase is the evocation of nature-imagery which is certainly fitting when describing a Gaelic goddess. The strained interpretation of this phrase, however, is perhaps that Ireland is geographically bordered by the political symbol of the rose, England. The latter is not as fitting, admittedly, especially as Yeats does not pursue this line of thinking. Rather, the

⁷⁶ Heaney, "Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry," p. 38

⁷⁷ Yeats, "To Ireland in the Coming Times," p. 41

speaker continues to describe a mystical history wherein Ireland is conceived before God even made “the angelic clan,” a claim which positions the divine importance of Ireland directly above those of angels. At the end of the stanza, this “history” of Ireland is directly integrated with Yeats’s own poetry, for “Time” frames Ireland’s history with poetic measures. In this sense, Ireland’s history is both inherently poetic and poetic in an artificial sense. Overall, the first stanza of this poem renders Ireland as a mystical land that exists since the very beginning of space and time, while explicitly acknowledging that this ‘historical’ framework is both poetic in itself and *can* be poetry, as evident by the poem itself. This integration further suggests that mythologized history is perhaps equally compelling as non-mythologized history, if not more so. Historicity, in Yeats’s depiction of history through “To Ireland in the Coming Times,” is in equal parity to poetic narrativization.

Yeats continuously develops the fantastical depiction of this archaic Éire by alluding to the ‘elemental creatures’ that inhabit such a land but can apparently be controlled through an integration of poetry with history. These creatures;

hurry from unmeasured mind / To rant and rage in flood and wind; / Yet he who
treads in measured ways / May surely barter gaze for gaze. / Man ever journeys on
with them / After the red-rose-bordered hem. / Ah, faeries, dancing under the
moon, / A Druid land, a Druid tune!⁷⁸

Yeats is describing the inverse of his imaginary Éire: one without imposed constraints, one that is all mystical naturalism, one with no poetry or historical context to make sense of it. Indeed, these creatures are “elemental” and embody the worst of nature through the floods

⁷⁸ Yeats, ‘To Ireland in the Coming Times,’ p. 41

and winds. Fittingly, the speaker cautions against the uncontained imagination of an “unmeasured mind” and instead opts for, fittingly, “measured ways.” Achieving an orderly, “measured” mode of imagining history through the imaginative capacity of poetry, Yeats states that one may, “surely barter gaze for gaze.” These reciprocal gazes can resonate with Hegel’s elaboration on the positioning of the self, both relative to history and to recognizing others, as he states; “Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.”⁷⁹ In Yeats’s own case, his dialectical attainment of self-consciousness positions him, unsurprisingly, in his self-determined image of Éire: a “Druid land” with “faeries... under the moon.” Ultimately, Yeats is subtly referring to his own process of poetically imagining Ireland and her “history,” as does his means of imposing a sense of order—fantastical and mystical though it may be—dialectically reinforce his own self-consciousness and his own sense of imposed order.

Yeats concludes the poem by lamenting what he sees as the future for both Ireland and himself: a place without mysticism, poetry, and the imagination of Ireland that accompanies such mystic poetry. Yeats writes that the elemental creatures are unfortunately going to, “No place for love and dream at all; / For God goes by with white footfall. / I cast my heart into my rhymes, / That you, in the dim coming times, / May know how my heart went with them / After the red-rose-bordered hem.”⁸⁰ Here, Yeats again explicitly acknowledges the artifice of his “dream” as it crumbles when “God goes by;” perhaps this is because there is a more prevalent God to challenge his “pagan” musings. As the poem concludes, Yeats’s speaker indicates that his “heart” is with his “rhymes” and, by

⁷⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 110

⁸⁰ Yeats, “To Ireland in the Coming Times,” p. 42

extension, with the mystical creatures and the “red-rose-bordered hem” which synecdochally signifies Éire. The speaker envisions a future Ireland where there is only the sentimental attachment to mystical Irish creatures that such poetry renders real; this level of abstraction and complete dearth of material grounding belies Yeats’s own conceptualization of historico-poetics: a history totally grounded in legends and myths found in some poetry (and certainly his own poetry).

As such, history is immaterial to a young Yeats, for all sense of space and time is suspended in the artifice of poetry and the comforting abstracts therein. In other words, history exists exclusively contingent to poetry and myth in this Yeatsian construction. As such, Yeats’s historico-poetic prism casts a spectrum of light on how mythological aspects can inform a romantic perspective on Irish poetics and history (to the extent that Yeats’s earlier poetry meaningfully conditions a broader sense of either).

Whereas Yeats actively accepts that he is writing a narrative of Irish legend into his poetry, Eavan Boland deliberately deconstructs such mythologies in her poetry to attain a more coherent and grounded sense of Irish history and poetry. In her poem “What Language Did to Us,” Boland actively rejects the abstractions of language, poetry, and mythology that condition her and other Irish people subject to such cultural apparatus. The speaker looks out from her porch and is surprised to see, “A shepherdess, her smile cracked, / her arm injured from the mantelpieces / and pastorals where she posed with her crook.”⁸¹ That the shepherdess would simply appear by the speaker’s house suggests the pervasive nature of the figure of the shepherdess and pastoralism more broadly. The shepherdess is described with a “smile cracked” and “arm injured,” indicating how her

⁸¹ Boland, ‘What Language Did to Us,’ p. 63

pervasive nature is too much for her to bear; that is, the ubiquity of the image of the shepherdess is conducive to the fracturing of the image itself, thereby losing its significance in its multiplicity of usage. The speaker reinforces this fracture between sign and signified when she explicitly refers to the image being overly used on “mantelpieces” and in “pastorals,” sites in which the image takes on manifold significance through excessive use. Boland’s concern, then, is with imagery that is reduced to signifiers without any significance—but what, however, is the effect of such a phenomenon?

Boland addresses the effect of making art into the mundane by claiming that this relationship to historico-poetics is conducive to a sheer lack of humanity, a suspension of the self into the timeless, a detached deferment to the abstract. The speaker assumes an internal voice conveyed through italics, pensively considering, “*what language did to us. Here / is the wound, the silence, the wretchedness... We cannot sweat here. Our skin is icy. / We cannot breed here. Our wombs are empty. / Help us to escape youth and beauty.*”⁸² By directly regarding the very functionality of language in her poem, Boland effectively constructs a meta-narrative of Irish cultural imagery and art inasmuch as she is actively questioning the very implications of her own poem. Referring to such damage done by the reduction of cultural imagery, the speaker refers to “the wound, the silence, the wretchedness,” and such syntactical fragmentation and asyndeton belies a fundamental fragmentation and degeneration in language itself: this structural breakdown is itself the inflicted “wound.” In stark contrast to Yeats’s imagination of Ireland as being romantically suspended from time at the very inception of all existence, Boland laments the inhumane temporal suspension that poetic language can confer, as her speaker pleads: “Our skin is

⁸² Boland, ‘What Language Did to Us,’ pp. 64-5

icy... Help us to escape youth and beauty.” Boland’s speaker indicates how poetic language can be beautiful, surely, but that this beauty is eternally (and, therefore, inhumanely) transfixed in poetry. As such, an imagination of the self, relative to art, is the imagination of one’s self wholly detached from the material conditions of one’s life; poetry, then, can function to glorify Ireland into a timeless space (as Yeats does) and yet this glorification can detract from a sense of humanity, since humanity cannot be abstracted into eternity as art can.

As such, Boland’s speaker concludes the poem with considerable anxiety about the reduced state of humanity that an elevating mode of art can (ironically) induce, and exhorts the audience to opt for a kind of poetry that is actually compatible with humanity. The speaker finishes the poem by asking; “*Write us out of the poem. Make us human / in cadences of change and mortal pain / and words we can grow old and die in.*”⁸³ Whomever the speaker is speaking to, the function of the meta-narrative here is to critique the dearth of humanity in such timeless—or, perhaps more fittingly, exhausted—cultural imagery. Consequently, the speaker’s asking to leave the poem is itself an exhortation for a totally new kind of poetry. This new poetry would have to embody human “change and mortal pain” as opposed to establishing artistic abstracts that are unchanging and immortal in their unattainable divinity. Indeed, this kind of poetry would not only embody human mortality, but would accompany it in its featuring “words we can grow old and die in.” This form of poetry effectively accords humanity with poetry instead of casting a disjunction between what is actually possible and what is poetically desirable.

⁸³ Boland, ‘What Language Did to Us,’ p. 65

In some of Yeats's earlier works, there is a sense of estrangement and a "persisting sense of unreality," both of which can indirectly lead to increasingly extreme and violent politics, as well as obfuscatory accounts of historical events.⁸⁴ In other words, his fixation on Ireland's mythological status produces a poetic framework of history that distorts any meaningful grasp on historical reality. Conversely, Boland effectively showcases how such poetic mythologizing reduces any human dynamism to the frozen constraints of fantasy, thereby depicting how a mythology such as Yeats's is as functionally feasible as it is realistic. Through her critical poetry, Boland advocates for a historico-poetic framework that does not simply steep in its own pretensions of an innate Irish capacity for poetic mysticism, but that rather casts a meaningful sense of self, community, and history for those adherent to it.

Part Three—*Ar Bás na hÉire Mistiúil*: The Death of Mystic Ireland

*I might as well be another guest / at the wedding-feast / of Strongbow and Aoife
MacMurrough... It's as if someone had slipped / a double-edged knife between my ribs
/ and hit the spot exactly.*⁸⁵

An iteration of this "ideology of loss" played out during the 1916 Easter Uprising through the particular strain of Irish Republicanism advocated by the poet and revolutionary leader, Pádraig Pearse. This strain was focused on the idea of "blood

⁸⁴ Dutka, p. 84

⁸⁵ Muldoon, "The Marriage of Aoife and Strongbow" p. 157

sacrifice,” which, according to Heaney, was both related to the mythology surrounding the 1798 Freeman’s Rebellion as well as an odd conjunction of ancient, Gaelic religious rites with Catholic notions of Christ’s blood being transubstantiated.⁸⁶ A rebellion with an underpinning sense of blood sacrifice, however, was essentially a death drive that unsurprising leads to death; dying for this abstract mythology in this instance, however, presented Yeats with a serious ideological confrontation—in essence, the brutal, material reality of the 1916 Uprising jarred against Yeats’s abstract impositions onto it.

Despite Yeats’s ambiguous approach to 1916, there is still a profound resonance between the poetic and mythological frameworks of history held by both Yeats and Pearse. Yeats and Pearse were parallels in their obsession with the preservation of a mystical, Gaelic culture as a signifier of an independent, sovereign nation without traces of British influence. The very question of “Gaelic culture,” however, is fairly flexible; indeed, one prevailing narrative is that Gaelic culture “died” during the marriage of the Welsh mercenary Strongbow to the Irish princess Aoife in 1170 after and due to the Norman Invasion of Ireland in 1167, effectively playing into the trope of the “culturally female voice of the subjugated Irish.”⁸⁷ Free of any Norman or English influence, the Gaelic culture represented in the *Táin* were “alive” textually, and certainly during the Gaelic revival of the early twentieth century.⁸⁸ As such, any narrativization of Gaelic culture is multiplicitous at least and certainly not outright “dead;” even so, Yeats insisted on establishing a “unity of culture” in Ireland, yet found himself in the midst of modernization and uprising. Indeed,

⁸⁶ Heaney, *The Place of Writing*, p. 38

⁸⁷ Coughlan, “Bog Queens” in *Theorizing Ireland*, p. 34

⁸⁸ Cairns and Richards, “What do we hope to make of Ireland?” in *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Culture*, p. 66

“the kind of art that [Yeats] wanted and the kind of culture that an industrial civilization was inexorably shaping were not in any way compatible.”⁸⁹ Yeats’s reasoning of a unity of culture resonates with Gramsci’s description of a cultural counter-hegemony used as a vanguard against the cultural hegemony of the ruling class, but the difference lies in Yeats’s “unity of culture” romanticizing a rustic and imagined past.⁹⁰ As such, it is in 1916 that Yeats finds himself—and Ireland—at a junction between the imagination of Ireland through a constructed, mythologized past and a materially unshaped, politically uncertain future. This very framing is the issue at hand: the mythologized imagination of Ireland suspends any historical contingency or material analysis, and so the future—“grounded” in mere abstracts—is as uncertain as the past is artificial.

Yeats’s anxieties and uncertainties about his own vision of Ireland and the Ireland being formed around him are embodied in the poem “Easter, 1916.” After depicting some specific revolutionaries (including Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz, notably) the speaker focuses on the essence of these revolutionaries in relation to the essence of Ireland, stating:

Hearts with one purpose alone / Through summer and winter seem / Enchanted to a stone / To trouble the living stream. / The horse that comes from the road, / The rider, the birds that range... Minute by minute they live: / The stone’s in the midst of all.⁹¹

Similar to his notion of a “unity of culture,” the speaker of Yeats’s poem views the revolutionaries as having “one purpose alone,” the political manifestation of his cultural

⁸⁹ Ure, *Towards a Mythology*, p. 100

⁹⁰ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 418

⁹¹ Yeats, “Easter, 1916” p. 153

project. The speaker continues to describe the revolution as being “enchanted to a stone to trouble the living stream,” a fixed obstruction to the natural imagery that is inherent to Yeats’s mysticized imagination of Ireland. As such, this supposed unity of culture that embodies in the stone poses an issue for Yeats’s holistic view of Irish culture as an entity intertwined with nature: there are therefore two “unified” modes of cultural existence that Yeats perceives in the Uprising, and they are at odds with each other. The disjunction between these two modes is apparent in the difference in character between the natural scene and the stone. The scene is brimming with dynamic, living creatures, including the “living stream” and “the birds that range;” standing among the scene but apart in its unmoving nature, the stone is a “trouble” to the “living stream” and the scene as a whole. As such, Yeats views the Uprising as both promising and threatening to his imagined Ireland, and the main thing that he can coherently convey is his ambivalence: that “the stone” is transfixed in space, an entity that blends into “the midst” of the natural imagery, yet stands cold and solid against the dynamic liveliness of the scene.

The speaker expands on the image of the stone to question the violence of the Uprising, lamenting the material reality of their death against the abstract dreams that they died for. Accounting for the toll of deaths, the speaker states:

Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart... What is but nightfall? / No, no,
not night but death; / Was it needless death after all? / For England may keep faith /
For all that is done and said. / We know their dream; enough / to know they
dreamed and are dead.⁹²

⁹² Ibid.

If the revolutionaries are afflicted with “a stone of the heart,” they are either deprived of their souls through violence or literally dead through the stillness of their hearts—such ambiguous phrasing casts an abstract propositions in the former, and a harsh material reality in the latter. The speaker questions this internal inconsistency, solemnly declaring the fates of the republican martyrs to be “not night but death;” in this sense, the speaker comes to terms with the inability to frame such violence poetically (that death can adequately be described as “night”) for their deaths are simply deaths. The speaker grapples with this reality, especially in the context of England’s possible retaliations in the coming future. Noting that England will keep account of all that is “done and said,” the speaker contemplates whether the martyrs dreams were truly meaningful, for they still “dreamed and are dead;” setting these two phrases in parallel structure (inasmuch as there are two verbs connected by “and”) as well connecting the phrases through the assonance of a “D” sound, Yeats also draws a structural connection between the dreams of the martyrs constituting what they had “done and said,” which, in turn, constitutes their death. Overall, then, the speaker confronts the disjunction between the abstract frameworks of the martyrs—that is, their dreams for a sovereign, republican Ireland—and the material reality of their deaths against an overwhelming colonial power.

By the end of the poem, the speaker reflects on the future of Ireland in the wake of such martyrdom, and, in doing so, explicitly constructs a framework of Irish history that anticipates a historically contingent future—a future predicated on past colonial violence, conditioned to change at least in part through decolonial violence. Directly referring to the act of constructing such a historico-poetic framework, the speaker assumes the first person voice (becoming intertwined with Yeats, thereby replacing any poetic suspension with

Yeats's own intervention) and declares: "I write it out in verse— / MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse / Now and in time to be, / Wherever green is worn, / Are changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born."⁹³ Yeats's speaker refers to the explicit narrativization of these revolutionaries by plainly stating "I write it out in verse," effectively intertwining a writing of history with the artifice of poetry. Interestingly, Yeats's delineation of some of the martyrs provides a direct link between Yeats's conception of a poetic history and Pearse's; not only does Yeats explicitly refer to Pearse, but Pearse's name is framed in a rhyming scheme aligned with "verse," further denoting the resonance between the two regarding history and poetry. Through the uprising itself— and the poetic narrativization of it—everything is "changed utterly," "now and in time to be." As such, Yeats draws a direct link between the tumultuous violence of 1916 to an anticipated, contingent history, whereby the future of Ireland is inextricably (and ironically) located in the rending violence of the past. Yeats can only anticipate immense change to the very narrative of how Ireland is imagined and contains his ambivalence on this change in the charged phrase "a terrible beauty." Ultimately, Yeats's employment of historico-poetics is a mode of historical projection, the anticipation of the future (uncertain though it may be) through an engaged, poetic analysis of the past.

1916 poses itself as a junction between myth and materiality that Yeats cannot fully reconcile. He can only grapple with its great capacity to change the very idea (both conceptually mythological and material) of Ireland herself. The crux of Yeats's concern, perhaps, was the failure of the revolutionaries to establish a sovereign state, and a "unity of culture" to enliven it. The execution of the 1916 martyrs was a grisly reminder of the

⁹³ Yeats, "Easter, 1916" pp. 153-4

colonial apparatus that governed Irish politics and culture from afar, threatening both Irish political and cultural sovereignty. Foucault claims that public execution was “justice as the physical, material, and awesome force of the sovereign displayed there. The ceremony of the public torture and execution displayed for all the see the power relation that gave [the sovereign’s] force to the law.”⁹⁴ Following Foucault’s claim, then, the public execution of the 1916 martyrs was a brutal, imperial manifestation of public, the clear public signifier of the sovereignty of British power over all of Irish life. In the context of both Foucault’s and Yeats’s analyses, the material power and sovereignty of the British colonial apparatus is, ultimately and unfortunately, the dominant, crushing force that drags Yeats’s poetic abstractions into a serious questioning of Irish material conditions.

Whereas Yeats constructs a poetic matrix through which notions of mythology, materiality, and colonialism are interpolated, Boland (in her propensity for deconstructive, critical poetry) addresses the mode of mythology that colonial power is itself based on, through her poem “In Which the Ancient History I Learn Is not My Own.” Displaced from her native Ireland, the young speaker sits in a primary school classroom in England and envisions the space that separates her from home by thinking about how; “the waters / of the Irish sea, / their shallow weave / and cross-grained blue green / had drained away / to the pale gaze / of a doll’s china eyes— / A stare without recognition or memory.”⁹⁵ The speaker employs language pertaining to how the sea contains integrated multitudes: its “shallow weave” and “cross-grained” colors. The space between her and Ireland (which is, incidentally, the eponymous “Irish Sea”) is dynamic in its polyvalent character, yet this

⁹⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 50

⁹⁵ Boland, “In Which the Ancient History I Learn Is not My Own,” p. 39

character fades to memory. Specifically, the memory of Ireland's color and nature devolves to the "pale gaze / of a doll's china eyes," effectively negating the color any vivid memory of home into a "pale gaze." Forgetting the identity of Ireland, the speaker slips from her own sense of identity. In this sense, the historical identification of Ireland becomes intimately integrated with a personal, self-identification: known history and personal history are mutually intertwined. The speaker can only remember her home through the eyes of a doll, thereby assuming a caricature of herself through the doll; by extension, eyes made of "china" register England's colonial ventures in China during the nineteenth century (whereby they acquired such commodities as porcelain.) As such, her childhood in England slowly begins to detract from her own personal "recognition" of herself or "memory" or her homeland—in this sense, England fosters a space where Irish identity and history is slowly reworked and negated, which functions to reduce the looming colonial history of Ireland, the grievous violence that England actively benefits from.

Boland acutely locates the innocuous setting of a primary school as a site of imperial ideology, a pedagogical means of ideological construction and conditioning. As a young girl, the speaker certainly feels these mechanisms acting against her especially since she yearns for her home in this environment. As such, she finds that she suddenly "wanted... To read out names / I was close to forgetting. / Wicklow. Kilruddery. Dublin."⁹⁶ Here, the speaker explicitly recognizes that she is about to forget her home and delineates several places in Leinster to reinvigorate her memory. The punctuation separating the names invites a reading of these place names with the intonation of a mantra—a mechanism for remembrance. Despite her displacement from Ireland into the very locus of Ireland's

⁹⁶ Boland, "In Which the Ancient History I Learn Is not My Own," p. 40

colonizers, the speaker still insists on her own identity and past, which translates into maintaining Irish identities and history more broadly.

Boland concludes the poem by changing the narrative voice to that of the speaker's teacher, the very conduit of conditioning students into a colonial perspective on history. Resonating with the speaker's own displacement, the teacher grounds a colonial teaching of British history through another empire: the Roman Empire. Connecting Britain's own imperial strength to the Roman's imperium, the teacher states that; "*The Roman Empire was / the greatest Empire / ever known— / until our time of course— / while the Delphic Oracle / was reckoned to be / the exact centre / of the earth.*"⁹⁷ With the phrase "until our time of course" on its own line and between em-dashes, the teacher emphasizes Britain's current role as "the greatest Empire ever known." The temporal displacement of teaching Britain's imperial power by aligning it with the imperial power of the Roman Empire has several key functions: to foster ideological recognition of Britain's strength, to obscure the colonial foundations of such strength by focusing on the strength of another empire altogether, and, ultimately, to construct a mythos of British imperialism that is rooted in a glorified past beyond reach. Such a function is parallel to Yeats's reification of Irish mythology, yet Yeats's poetic directive does not justify colonialism by nullifying its violence, as this British mythos does.⁹⁸ The heart of such a mythos manifests in the Oracle being the "exact centre of the earth;" inasmuch as Roman imperial power transfers onto Britain through this pedagogical framework, Britain assumes the role as the "exact centre of the earth" under the ideological mythos being taught. In terms of the speaker's

⁹⁷ Boland, "In Which the Ancient History I Learn Is not My Own," p. 40

⁹⁸ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 38

perspective, this colonial displacement of power onto the Romans further exacerbates the speaker's sense of displacement from home, distancing her further into another unknown land and further into a self-justifying colonial modality.

Boland concludes the poem with the teacher (still) controlling the poetic narrative (as well as the colonial and ideological narrative, by extension) who inadvertently provides insight into the baseless abstractions of such ideological conditioning. Describing the Oracle further, the teacher accounts how, "*the ancients traveled / to the Oracle... They brought questions about tillage and war. / They rarely left with more / than an ambiguous answer.*"⁹⁹ The locus of the Oracle—the very epicenter of the Roman's ideological production of knowledge-power, and England's through the teacher's displacement of it onto Britain—cannot even supply adequate answers regarding material factors of power. Regarding "tillage and war," material foundations of power through peace and war respectively, the Oracle can only provide "an ambiguous answer." As such, the Oracle's production of a Roman conceptualization-of-self as the "exact centre of the earth" cannot ground itself in any tangible means: the function of the Oracle is merely ideological and purely abstract. Given the teacher's transference of Roman imperial power to that of the British, Britain's own sense of its mythic power—propagated to school children to ensure its survival—is equally abstracted. It is not that either empire was *not* rooted in material exploitation and extraction, but rather that the production and dissemination of knowledge-power is both artificial and crucial for maintaining such material exploitation. Ultimately, the speaker presumably finds a sense of resolution in her personal displacement by identifying the sheer artifice of a history produced by a colonial power,

⁹⁹ Boland, "In Which the Ancient History I Learn Is not My Own," p. 41

which displaces itself onto an older imperial power with a more apparent mythos. Within this presumed (or rather, ideal) resolution is the speaker's recognition of her own identity and the affirmation of her own country's history in the face of an overwhelming ideological apparatus.¹⁰⁰

Through a specific mode of poetic historicizing, Yeats casts concern for the future of Irish colonial violence while implicitly fretting over his own vision of Ireland in the wake of such violence. Indeed, Yeats had effectively realized that the use of Irish mythology to assert a distinct culture and national sovereignty faltered in the face of British violence infringing on any dream of Irish sovereignty. Boland offers a personal narrative, a historico-poetic vision of Britain's own ruling ideology and the pedagogical channels through which it disseminates. Boland's analysis also offers a vision of British ruling ideology that, through its infringement on the national and cultural sovereignty of Ireland, conditions the need for such anti-colonial, ideological assertions as that Yeats stands by in his fixation on Irish mythology.

Herein is a fraught case of dialectical interpolations: Irish culture and political structures are simultaneously Irish and British. There is not simply a case of Gaelic revivalists struggling to preserve Irish culture in the face of British cultural hegemony. Given Ireland's cultural status as an English-speaking land coupled with a political history of British and English rule and misrule, the difficulty of navigating Irish identity in all of its cultural, political, and historical implications arises from the conjoined matrix of the cultural, political, and historical spheres. It is impossible to extricate any facet of Irish life to examine Irish national identity when the "very means of Irish nationalism, from literacy

¹⁰⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 112

and communications to education and political organization, were largely British-made materials. Nationalism is an affirmation of difference or autonomy... [But there] is no genuine independence... to assert.”¹⁰¹ As such, Boland’s particular positions afford an understanding of the key perspective that Yeats is missing: not only self-critical or material analysis (in his earlier works, at least) but critical insight into the distinctly *British* conditions, both ideological and material, that looms over Irish life.

Contained within the 1916 Uprising is a set of interwoven conditions that cannot be extricated from each other. Whether in the fixation on the mythologized histories of Ireland or of Britain, a cultural focus can distort history and predicate a skewed, dangerous form of decolonial or colonial violence, respectively. As Fanon indicates, the preservation of a national culture and its associated mythology is essential to combatting the interpellation of colonial ideology, but decolonial violence remains *the* absolute cornerstone of national independence¹⁰²—that is, vying for cultural power is important, but dying for national power is all the more severe and substantial. Many narratives that derive from the 1916 Uprising arrive at their own political animus; the only constant in 1916, no matter the historico-poetic narrativization of it, is the contest of colonial and decolonial modes of power. Yeats’s poem “Easter, 1916” presents a particular historico-poetic framing of the Uprising, and this framing is valuable as the written, substantial record of how 1916 was conceptualized, at least by Yeats. Although Boland’s personal, intimate poetry deconstructs the broader apparatus of mythology-infused historico-poetics, her poetry also depicts the importance of the immediate and personal; thus, Yeats’s own record, flawed and uncertain

¹⁰¹ Eagleton, “Changing the Question,” in *Theorizing Ireland*, p. 80

¹⁰² Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 25

as it may be, is valuable both despite and because of its flawed and uncertain nature, since it is personally and intimate *someone's*.

Conclusion—The Transfusion of Blood

*However... the economic and social bases of the oppression are... [not] enough to maintain it. So the apparatus of romanticism is hauled in.*¹⁰³

The broader superstructural matrix of culture—especially a culture dictated by a colonial power—is a means of reinforcing the underlying ideology of “economic and social bases of oppression.” The domain of culture, especially the domain of Irish poetry, can be a means of interpellating anti-colonial value-systems in an otherwise colonial culture—such is a crucial element in the formation of an independent Ireland. Yeats presents an “authentically Gaelic” vision of Ireland, only to be weighed down by uncertainty when reflecting on the crushing violence of 1916. Conversely, Boland (although occupying a different historico-temporal moment) effectively deconstructs the mystical blood-myths and sign-signified confluents of culture and ethnicity that Yeats and Pearse hold onto. Although Boland does not necessarily depict a future Ireland like Yeats does in the addressed poems, she rather cautiously unveils the danger inherent to this detached, mythologized historico-poetics. Whether it be Yeats’s development as a poet from mythological fixations to the encroaching reality of colonial subjugation or Boland’s capacity for critical deconstruction, what (if any) are the considerable effects of poetry on history and politics, if not merely to depict and frame them? Is there any

¹⁰³ Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*, p. 131

credence to “the notion that poetry might have a desirable, never mind a demonstrable, relation to the life of a nation”?¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Heaney, *The Place of Writing*, p. 41

Chapter 3— Historico-Poetic Functionality During the Troubles

Introduction

Given the many contradicting and complex elements that constitute the three decades of political upheaval and violence between 1968 and 1998, the “Troubles” is perhaps a fitting name inasmuch as no particular aspect—whether it be the violence, rhetoric, or peace process—is emphasized; in other words, the title of “the Troubles” appropriately approaches the three decades with a framework wide enough to contain its broad contradiction and complexity.

It follows that an appropriate medium to regard the Troubles would be one that could also adequately regard the vast interrelation and contradiction inherent to the Troubles. (Poetry is not inherently political, not politics inherently “poetic.” There is not so much an “essential” resonance between the two as there is moreover an incidental, mutual supplementation.) When poetry utilizes the deliberate manipulation of language as a process towards newer meanings novel depictions of poetic interrelation, poetry becomes an ideal framework with which to address the Troubles. In the context of the Troubles, however, poetry does not necessarily offer a neat equipoise of political or religious sides, nor does it dogmatically cling to one side; rather, poetry offers newer discursive ontologies through the manipulation of language, which can, in turn, supersede the discursive fixation of history’s contingency throughout the Troubles.

Alongside an over-fixation on history through the contemporaneous discourses to the Troubles, there was an acute attention to state and political violence. As the poetic

analysis of Yeats's and Boland's works indicates, there can be considerable disjunctions between sign and signifier. In the contradictory and confusing matrix of Irish political discourse during the Troubles, "violence" can be nebulous: in an atmosphere of political and state violence, what space is there to regard the other, less-visible modalities of violence? As Seamus Heaney, one of the more prevalent poets of the Troubles, indicates throughout his body of work, there is violence in the "Irish" trait of according with nature, just as there is violence in adhering too fervently to the "Irish" fixation on history. Interestingly, Heaney's development from a focus on material naturalism towards a detached sense of history is the inverse to Yeats's own development. Although Heaney does not abide by the same occult mysticism and ethnic-cultural glorification that Yeats's engages in, their focuses are nonetheless parallel. Just as Boland poses a critical, deconstructive lens to Yeats and the broader apparatus of historical mysticism through literature in Ireland, Boland is also complementary to Heaney, and vice versa. In her own right, Boland's historico-poetic depictions of violence focus the ontological constraints that poetic tradition conditions into its subject (both poet and audience) as well as the violence inherent in the colonial legacy and political animus of language.

Both Boland and Heaney offer various modalities of expressing and conceptualizing the "violence" of the Troubles that is not intermixed with the overly-wrought narrativization and dogmas that permeate their contemporaneous discourses. In this manner, then, both poets offer historico-poetic examples that function to both supplement and critique the artificial histories of Ireland through histories that are themselves explicitly and openly artificial in their poetic forms, but not their poetic significance. As opposed to the emphasis on cyclical violence of Pearse or the earlier mythologizing of

Yeats, Heaney and Boland open up discursive histories and poetics that are grounded in the affects of the personal, instead of the discursive fixation on violence and a political dependence on the contingent, ever-looming albatross of history.

Part One—Violence as Material: Heaney’s Grounded Naturalism

After his premiere publication of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney went on to publish *Door into the Dark* in 1969, the second year of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Thematically similar to his first publication, Heaney’s *Door into the Dark* is parallel to the mythological-material conjunction that often accompanies the historico-poetic strain in Ireland; whereas Yeats’s poetry or Kinsella’s *Táin* integrates mythology and history in a poetic modality, Heaney focuses on the integration of history and the mundane—the very earth that grounds, orients, and sustains such history.

Yeats’s and Pearse’s sense of blood-sacrifice accords with the poem “The Wind that Shakes the Barley,”¹⁰⁵ and Heaney’s differentiation from their work is apparent in his poem on the same topic, “Requiem for the Croppies,” from *Door into the Dark*. Given the same topic, then, the poem is certainly about the failed Irish Rebellion of 1798. A one stanza poem, Heaney opens directly and suddenly, beginning: “The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley—/ No kitchens on the run, no striking camp—/ We moved quick and sudden in our own country. / The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp.”¹⁰⁶ The opening line is meaningfully coherent, yet all verbs are implied and otherwise omitted. In this explicitly

¹⁰⁵ Addressed in Chapter 2.

¹⁰⁶ Heaney, “Requiem for the Croppies” p. 23

rendered image of the opening, there is an implicit suspension of agency through any syntactic predicate, the causal predicate of which becomes apparent in the next line. Linked through the epistrophe of an em-dash at the end of the first two lines, the second line is syntactically detached from the adjacent lines. The line's detachment underscores the reason for the suspension of agency: these yet-to-be defined subjects are "on the run." As such, there are no "kitchens" nor any "striking camp," and both of these obstructed luxuries are even structurally obstructed from each other through the caesura (the comma) between them. The characters and their motives described through two prepositional phrases, the primary subject and predicate are relieved from suspension—"We moved." The first-person plural imbues the narrative speaker into both the agentive moment and the historical instant. The reflexive modifier "own" in the phrase "own country" conveys that they should not have to be "on the run," moving so "quick and sudden," and that some unnamed entity is therefore intruding onto their "own" sovereignty to move in such a manner. The subsequent line alters the object and tone of the poem rather abruptly. Without prior historical context, the prior action of the first three lines are somewhat vague, depicting *some* people on the run from *something*. This uncertainty descends into the syntactical framing between two definite articles: "The priest" and "the tramp." The superficial, connotative signifiers of both figures suggest moral purity and abjectness, respectively; despite such signifiers, they are on an equal of mundane depravity in this context, both being "behind the ditch." The opening affords a vague outline, sketched and rendered through running, the distinct figures of the priest and tramp accompanying them, and, of course, the barley that sustains them given their inability to be transfixed.

These vaguely depicted people attain a greater degree of substance in the next several lines—these are militiamen. The initially vague description is fitting for a militia, for the development of the poem betrays the vague and diffuse origins of an informal band of militia volunteers. Their martial characterization becomes apparent when the speaker describes them as, “A people, hardly marching—on the hike— / We found new tactics happening each day: / We’d cut through reins and rider with the pike / And stampede cattle into infantry, / Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown.” The first two lines are structurally parallel to the opening, consisting of a prepositional phrase, another prepositional phrase detached with em-dashes, and a subsequent, first-person plural clause. This poetic structuralism renders these wandering people with an abstract framework for order, where there is otherwise no military order among them: they are “hardly marching,” for they are rather “on the hike” in the more civilian sense. Their discovery of “new tactics each day” further augments their lack of military order, implying that they conduct a guerilla mode of warfare that derives from a lack of formal training. The objects of their tactics—their enemies—are rendered in obtuse terms that detract from any human qualities—the men on horses are “reins and rider” or “cavalry,” whereas the footmen are “infantry.” Following the naturalistic imagery of “barley” and the “ditch” in the opening, these men largely use nature to their advantage. Instead of fighting infantry head-on, they “stampede cattle;” instead of being bogged down against cavalry, they “retreat through hedges” to obstruct cavalry from closing the gaps of their retreat. As such, their traversal of their “own country” takes on new meaning, for their homeland defends them as much as they defend their homeland. Through their tactics, the militia—a common people from indeterminate backgrounds—resonates with the material aspect of nature and the

superstructural apparatus of their imagined Irish nation-state. The conjunction of the material and the superstructural herein is due to their defense of the land and the land's reciprocal defense of them, surely, but also because of the conventional association of "naturalism" with an imagined, "essentially Irish" nation-state.

Heaney ends the poem with the graphic end of these militia men's lives. Denoting how defeat is suffered under duress of Ireland's lack of material development but—given their material and political affinity for nature without industrial development—their lives are sublated into the barley fields for newer generations of Irish rebels. The speaker solemnly details how, "Terraced thousands died, shaking scythe at cannon. / The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave. / They buried us without shroud or coffin / And in August the barley grew up out of the grave." The integration of the dead into the soil which they fought for is immediately apparent in the opening phrase: "Terraced thousands died." The dead become "terraced," for they are leveled and reaped in their deaths and sown in the soil through their deaths. Likely farmers without much developed weapons themselves, they are armed the "scythe" against the "cannon," underscoring the difference in material development between agrarian Ireland and industrial Britain. Although this disjunction denotes a clear victor with Britain, the "scythe" also affords a poetic affinity with the soil; through their decayed and abject integration into the soil given their mere scythes, their resonance with nature through farming ensures a mystical sense of reaping themselves in the future. In this sense of fantastical, delayed gratification, the Irish are not so much slain by the British as they are actively providing sustenance for subsequent generations to resist Britain. The land becomes personified in its "blushing" with the blood of the "broken wave," which registers both a "wave" of men as well as an oceanic, watery wave. The

ambiguous meaning of “wave” suggests that the slain blood waters the soil, imbuing the land with the personified animus of the dead men as a collective (and the imagined nation-state that such animus further signifies.) In the beginning of the poem, the agency of the militia is limited to constant movement, opting for barley to avoid sedentary habits; by the end, however, the men are mass buried “without shroud or coffin,” and yet this disrespectful burial affords them a sedentary condition that is ironically unbound by funerary accessories, allowing them to ultimately be, “the barley [that] grew up out of the grave.”

Thus, the historical narrative that this poem promises (or, perhaps, forebodes) is one of cyclical resistance to Britain through an essentialized Irish affinity and mystical integration with nature. The whole of the poem is grounded into the mundane and the material, including the tactics and agricultural propensities of the militia that transmute into a fundamentally “Irish” accordance and integration with nature. By extension, the bodies and blood of the deceased become transubstantiated into Ireland herself, ascending from their abject material conditions—abject both in their lack of industrial development and their outright deaths—to the romanticized, integrated-whole of Ireland herself. Differentiating himself from Yeats and “The Wind that Shakes the Barley,” Heaney’s approach to the figurative mysticism inherent to Ireland’s historico-poetics is altogether more materialist, mundane, and grounded in its naturalist orientation than the pure abstractions of Yeats or the excessive political exhortations in “The Wind that Shakes the Barley.” In this manner, Heaney’s historical mimesis through mundane poetics is more wary of the fascist, blood-fixated propensities of Yeats or “The Wind that Shakes the Barley,” effectively offering a historical depiction of the 1798 Irish Rebellion with less of the

violent political, ethnic, and cultural implications. Having been published during the beginning of the Troubles, this poem's reception would likely have been contextualized in its current mode of colonial violence. Depicting this older, foreboding narrative of cyclical violence in a renewed poetic voicing, Heaney effectively warns against the revival of older historico-poetic modalities and the undying, romanticized blood-sacrifice thereof.

Part Two—Violence as Tradition: Boland's Central Marginality

*The truth is that I came to know history as a woman and a poet when I apparently left the site of it. I came to know my country when I went to live at its margin. I grew to understand the Irish poetic tradition only once I went into exile within it.*¹⁰⁷

Parallel to Heaney, Boland engages a material, historico-poetic modality, yet she often focuses on the lived experiences of womanhood and is otherwise more directly critical of discursive over-reliance on history. Published in her book of poetry *Night Feed* in 1982, "The New Pastoral" focuses on how the material, economic mode of production that historically permeates Ireland—pastoralism—reflects itself in the tradition of "the pastoral" poem.

Through her critical reconfiguration of the genre through "The New Pastoral," Boland effectively wrings the material and cultural aspects that inform and perpetuate a romanticized imagination of Ireland as thoroughly rustic, naturally pure, fundamentally sustaining, and essentially feminine. The speaker initiates the poem in a vague, primordial

¹⁰⁷ Boland, *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967-1987*, p. 13

beginning of humankind, declaring that, “The first man had flint to spark. He had a wheel / to read his world.”¹⁰⁸ The speaker immediately sets a Promethean temporal setting in which the “first man had flint to spark,” almost inciting fire—a moment away from initiating the technological development of humankind as a whole. Such is the beginning of the poem—the beginning of technological, material development, the primordial “spark” of a history that can only develop, never regress. This developmental sequence notably has an androcentric framing, being conducted by the “first man.” The development continues towards “a wheel,” and yet the subsequent, enjambed line is distorted in its meaning, for the wheel is the man’s means to “read his world.” Figuratively, this would register how this conceptualization of history is, by extension, a broader epistemological conceptualization whereby all knowledge is subsumed into this understanding of history as constant, unhindered progress. Since a literal reading of this sentence is jarring and nonsensical, Boland tactfully draws attention to this phrase by casting a disjunction between the sign and signified in this sentence. This disjunction, apparent as it is, further underscores how the understanding of history as a sequence of progress is merely a figurative imagination.

Boland continues onward in the poem and reorients the narrative attention towards the desperate pleas of a first-person perspective. Calling from the reaches of a new stanza, the speaker pleads: “I’m in the dark. // I am a lost, last inhabitant—/ displaced person / in a pastoral chaos. // All day I listen to / the loud distress, the switch and tick of / new herds. // But I’m no shepherdess.”¹⁰⁹ The structural detachment of the first stanza in this excerpt denotes the extreme alienation the speaker experiences: separated, astray in “the dark.”

¹⁰⁸ Boland, “The New Pastoral,” p. 125

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

This sense of alienation exacerbates by her being a “lost, last inhabitant.” This phrase is fraught with sequential assonance, from “lost” to “last” only being one letter apart, and that one letter, the soft “A,” being the fundamental root of assonance between “last” and “inhabitant;” as such, this meandering mode of assonance reflects the “lost,” meandering isolation of the poor speaker. The speaker locates herself in the end of the stanza: she is “displaced” into “a pastoral chaos.” Like socio-political discourses on Ireland’s resonance with other colonial-subject and partitioned countries contemporaneous to this poem’s publication,¹¹⁰ the subject is displaced into an ontological space that is simultaneously Ireland and not-Ireland—a “pastoral chaos.” This chaos is the overly-wrought artifice and reproduction of conservative national-imaginings that the pastoral poetic tradition produces. This tradition, when subjected onto the speaker, is rendered into an affectation of sheer “chaos” and “loud distress,” deconstructing the form and cadence of pastoral poetry into the complete lack of either. Such a wretched sound takes the form of a “switch and tick of / new herds,” the endless projection of a mechanical form—the “switch and tick”—onto the same naturalistic subject—“new herds”—despite the age of such a worn-out tradition. The speaker records the traditional replication of the pastoral form to the point where the artifice of pastoral poetry becomes neither naturalistic nor poetic, but a mere mechanism: a repetitive, grating repetition. As such, the speaker questions the complete deviation of this poetic tradition into the alienating and grating repetition for the sake of tradition, a phenomenon which the speaker, who is “no shepherdess,” has no control over except for critique.

¹¹⁰ Cleary, “Misplaced Ideas?” in *Theorizing Ireland*, pp. 96-7

The speaker questions whether there can be any poetic reorientation for pastoralism—whether or not a material, naturalistic grounding can ever take root again. Continuing to address herself as the prism through which the pain of this tradition refracts, she implores, “Can I unbruise these sprouts or cleanse this mud flesh / till it roots again? / Can I make whole / this lamb’s knuckle, butchered from its last crooked suckling?”¹¹¹ The ostensible serenity and purity inherent to the pastoral genre becomes tainted when materially manifested in these bruised “sprouts” and “mud flesh.” Whether referring to the flesh of the land that is reduced to the malformation of mud or some literal flesh (either of plants or animals) that loses structural integrity and vitality, reverting back to the chaotic recesses of the earth, the phrase “mud flesh” is certainly striking. In any case, the speaker is concerned with the reification of the material in a pastoral mode, hoping to revive the genre and its vitality “till it roots again.” The fixation on the vitality of the flesh extends to the image of a “lamb’s knuckle” and if the speaker can make it “whole” again. The anxious fixation on the image of the “lamb’s knuckle” signifies a fractured physical presence that betrays the fractures that the pastoral presses onto its poetic subject-object. Lastly, the speaker laments the lamb’s being “butchered” after the brief, vitalizing instance of its “its last crooked suckling.” Thus, the maternal sustenance of the “suckling” is devoid of its sustaining function—being the “last”—and its maternal nature—being reduced to an abject, “crooked” nature. By extension, the pastoral tradition is distorting and reductive to the maternal, sustaining nature of Ireland herself, vampirically “butchering” any chance at new life for the perpetuation of its own tradition. Gravely, any chance of resurrecting the

¹¹¹ Boland, “The New Pastoral,” p. 125

pure lamb, the grounded naturalism, or the Irish maternalism of pastoralism is lost to the tradition which fails to nurture any of these aspects.

At the height of her lamentation, the speaker considers finding a place in this archaic tradition, but she concludes that the tradition is too fraught to live in. Reflecting on the possibility of her place in the tradition, the speaker ponders:

I could be happy here. / I could be something more than a refugee // were it not for
 this lamb unsuckled, for the nonstop / switch and tick / telling me // there was a
 past, / there was a pastoral, / and these chances sights // are little more than /
 amnesias of a rite // I danced once on a frieze.¹¹²

The anaphora of “I could” promises a sense of structure and order amidst the “pastoral chaos,” a conditional voice that voices hope. The speaker’s self-identification as a “refugee” signifies her sense of national alienation, displaced from her country through a national poetic tradition that has been too skewed to be representative of the nation. The factors that hold the speaker in a state of critical questioning, however, are the “lamb unsuckled” and the continual “switch and tick:” the anti-maternal stunting of life in the former, and the mechanical, lifeless continuation of the tradition in the latter. Through a structural parallel at the ends of the lines in the next stanza, the poet is told of how the “past” is conjoined with the “pastoral,” suggesting that the pastoral is an adequate historico-poetic record of Ireland. The speaker thoroughly rejects this claim. Admonishing such a distorted tradition as “amnesias of a rite,” the speaker acutely exacts how pastoralism is a deviation from (rather than a traditional continuation of) history—an *oubliette* into which the historico-poetic imagination of Ireland is carelessly thrown. Set apart in its own stanza, the speaker

¹¹² Boland, “The New Pastoral,” p. 125

suddenly concludes with, “I danced on a frieze.” The ending is a compelling image of kinetic, dynamic resistance—a simple dance—on the ossifying, stone-cut constraints of culturally constructed history—a “frieze.”

The speaker concludes with an affirmation of the life outside of the historico-poetic constraints of pastoralism, a life of vitality away from the draining, mechanical droning of tradition. In Boland’s perspective, this older poetic form maintains an imagination of an archaic and pure Ireland that is too old to live and too “crooked” despite its pretensions of purity. This historico-poetic insistence on what Ireland “should” be, is an ontological violence, a limitation of the existential horizon; in the broader political anima of the Troubles, this political imagination—rendered through the historical and poetic modality of the pastoral genre—is itself a conceptual violence. Although perhaps not as pressing as the visceral violence around Boland during her construction of this poem, this political imagination is nonetheless a predicate to action, the interpellative sowing that flourishes into violence in the name of a decayed, lifeless vision.

Part Three—Violence as History: Heaney’s Yeatsian Detachment from a Categorical “History”

Just as Boland poetically cautions against the ontological and epistemological violence through conceptual limitations, Heaney also expresses belief in an open, conceptual liberty. Heaney’s extrication from conceptual constraints, however, proceeds as an extrication from his prior focus on materiality in poetry. Heaney explicitly outlines his own approach to poetry in a political and historical context, stating how, “He or she can be

the magical thinker; he or she that can stand for values that aren't utilitarian. The artist can refuse History as a category, can say "No, I prefer to dream possibilities."¹¹³ Exhortations to be "magical" or "to dream possibilities" are perhaps idealistic and naive. Heaney does not necessarily exact such optimistic exhortations in his poem "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," yet there is still a propensity towards conceptual liberation. Heaney sought ontological alternatives to the Troubles, away from the paradigmatic fixation on "History" and away from the hopelessness that senseless violence inevitably sows under the shadow of history. By taking a step back from the cyclical violence—and, by extension, the recursive and cyclical *ideas* pertaining to the Troubles—Heaney sought to utilize poetry to construct literary works that are distinct from the other literary products that are otherwise ingrained in the discursive conditions of sectarian violence unto perpetuity.

However, to what extent was Heaney fully committed—or rather, even *able*—to detach himself and his work from history itself? Heaney implies the artist's capacity to render reality *beyond* history. Richard Rankin Russell, a professor of English and literary critic, elaborates on how Heaney is inextricably (if not unconsciously) bound to Irish literary history and history more broadly, stating how:

Heaney's movement from the pressing world of fact and history in his native Northern Ireland... to the more abstract concerns... of the poet's consciousness reverses the trajectory of Yeats... The chiasmic movement of Heaney's own poetry in relation to that of Yeats proceeds from his own history.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Seamus Heaney, "Between North and South" p. 9

¹¹⁴ Russell, *Poetry and Peace: Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, and Northern Ireland*. p. 173

Russell effectively traces the poetic focus of both Heaney and Yeats and finds that the progression of their interests is inverted—or, in literary terms, they form a *chiasmus*. Not only does Heaney's poetry bear a developmental resemblance to Yeats's, but the resemblance itself is also poetic inasmuch as it is chiastic. Despite any resistance to the "category of History" that Heaney may have pursued, history is nonetheless pervasive—history is a Joycean nightmare. As such, any poetic attempts to deviate from history in search of something totally new will ironically (and, perhaps, poetically) revert back to a historical basis.

In his poem "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing", Heaney does not appeal to some incoherently broad Anglo-Irish history as some of his contemporaries might have, nor does Heaney appeal to some detached mystical history as Yeats does at some points. Rather, Heaney approaches the Troubles in the significance of its own contemporary moment; that is, Heaney does not find some possible resolution for the Troubles, but rather finds some sense of coherence and structure amid its quieter inconsistencies.

The first stanza of the first segment of Heaney's poem concerns the fragmentation of information pertaining to the Troubles for political capital and media-attention. With an acute focus for such disinformation, the speaker begins with poem, recounting:

I'm writing just after an encounter / With an English journalist in search of 'views /
On the Irish thing'. I'm back in winter / Quarters where bad news is no longer news,
/ Where media-men and stringers sniff and point, / Where zoom lenses, recorders
and coiled leads / Litter the hotels.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Heaney, "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing" p. 123

The enjambment between “views” and “On the Irish thing” is a structural disjunction that underscores the disjunction between the English journalist’s own “views” and the lived reality of the “thing.” The repetition of “news” in the fourth line implicitly depicts how the inundation of “bad news” does not warrant most news to be depicted anymore. The anaphora of “where” in the fifth and sixth lines effectively frames the fragmented syntax of both lines, thereby structurally framing the fragmented information that reporters create in order to have something, even if it is disorder; by extension, Heaney’s poetic framing of journalists feverishly grasping for disorder is itself an imposition of a constructed order onto disorder. In this manner, Heaney crafts a coherent narrative out of the fragmented incoherency of journalists, thereby superseding the media-produced, discursive disorder of the Troubles and establishing some anew from it. At the very outset of the poem, then, Heaney promises an ontology outside of the perpetual discourse of the Troubles, at least from a media perspective.

In the third segment of the poem, Heaney details how the Troubles have exacerbated the significance of otherwise-mundane names—forcing everyone into some political and religious tribe which they cannot be excised—and so everyone must act in clandestine manners to survive. Heaney implicitly outlines the history that predicates such social and political signifiers, stating; “Christ, it’s near time that some small leak was sprung / In the great dykes the Dutchman made / To dam the dangerous tide that followed Seamus.”¹¹⁶ Over the course of lines twenty eight to thirty, Heaney begins with a prepositional phrase explicitly exhorting to “Christ,” subsequently makes an implicit reference to the Protestant figure William of Orange, and then refers to “Seamus,” which,

¹¹⁶ Heaney, “Whatever You Say, Say Nothing” p. 124

given the context, likely denotes the Irish Catholic population more broadly. These indirect references to different bodies (both Protestant and Catholic, respectively) reinforce the bleak and oblique manner of discursive and social signaling. Heaney does not simply acquiesce to this subtle, conventional discourse, however. By framing these three different entities into three subsequent lines, the implicit references are understood by virtue of the references having contiguous lines: through contiguity, their implicit nature is further understood to be interrelated. In this manner, Heaney does not simply reduce his poetry to the clandestine nature of Troubles; rather, he utilizes the clandestine, implicit signifiers common to the Troubles in conjunction with poetic conventions that denote interrelation to depict how the Protestants and Catholics are interrelated themselves. Overall, Heaney effectively coopts the implicit signifiers of the Troubles to convey a truth that should have otherwise been explicit: that the Irish Christians are significantly more interrelated than their sectarian frameworks would permit them to be.

In the fourth and final segment of the poem, Heaney's "resolution" to the poem is certainly not a resolution of the Troubles; rather, Heaney proposes a means of ordering the disorder of the Troubles, at the very least. Concise and acidic, Heaney concludes thus: "Competence with pain, / Coherent miseries, a bite and sup, / We hug our little destiny again."¹¹⁷ The assonance of the "co" sound between "Competence" and "Coherent" is itself an interrelation, a coherency of language that transmutes the "pain" and "miseries" of the Troubles into clarity. From this perspective, the assumption that peace could be neatly processed from the Troubles is an erroneous one, for the only way to manage pain is to disentangle it into some definitive, understandable form. By the last two lines, Heaney

¹¹⁷ Heaney, "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing" p. 125

employs various words with infantile connotations: “sup,” “hug,” and “little.” In doing so, Heaney suggests that those involved in the conflict have perhaps not matured to the point of distilling pain into clarity, disorder into order. As such, the ending functions as an implicit exhortation to mature into a cultural point wherein pain is *processed*, and not simply diverted towards causing more pain. Overall, then, Heaney conveys that any alternative resolution to the Troubles is not simply peace; rather, any process towards peace is firstly contingent on pain being sublimated for one’s self instead of perpetuated into more pain for others. In other words, the conquest of cyclical disorder and pain requires a collective effort, Heaney argues, less the cycle is perpetuated by those on the margins of such a collective.

In his attempt to deconstruct the political signifiers of the Troubles, Heaney must fundamentally root his poetry in a categorical History—the very history that he is attempting to extricate. In this manner, Heaney showcases the limits of historico-poetic functionality; for its proclaimed capacity to poetically render new historical ontologies, it is always contingent on history. This is a safe and measured approach. As opposed to Yeats’s mystical detachment from history, or the *Táin*’s mythological-historical integration, Heaney’s attempt at historical extrication is, crucially, a failed project. The poetic narrativization is mutable and can be reoriented; history, however, is the overwhelming entity that mutates and reorients. Ultimately, Heaney calls attention to the overly-wrought and ever-permeating nature of History in Ireland. He cannot, however, negate its immense hold on Ireland through a historico-poetic reorientation of categorical historicity—especially in the context of history’s role in conditioning political ideologies of the Troubles.

Part Four—Violence as Language: Boland *as Gaeilge*

*In a borrowed language, you are conscious of words... [The] interval between yourself and your means of expression explains why it is difficult, even impossible, to be a poet in a language besides your own... [The poet] cannot... translate that subterranean agony from which poetry issues.*¹¹⁸

In the first chapter, bardic poetry is addressed as an exclusively masculine tradition conducted in the Irish language. After the Gaelic revival and the republican political animus that emphasized Gaelic culture and the Irish language throughout the Troubles (or even innocuous academic work in Irish or Celtic Studies) such poetic traditions and the Irish language were resurfacing.¹¹⁹ From Kinsella's publication of the *Táin* in 1969 to other Gaelic-culture initiatives, medieval Irish culture was exhorted as a guide through the tempestuous uncertainty of the Troubles. With the resurgent prevalence of such older poetic forms and languages, however, come antiquated and androcentric visions of Ireland. In other words, the insistence on old poetic forms and languages can, in Boland's view, not just perpetuate a distorted view of Ireland, but perpetuate dangerous epistemological and ontological conditions for Ireland that such archaic poetic traditions contain.

Boland's criticism of the nationalist politics of Irish language poetry is expressed in the poem "Mise Eire," published in *The Journey* in 1987. Translating to "I am Ireland," the poem rejects the nationalist reification of Ireland as a woman-figure that derives from the

¹¹⁸ Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations*, p. 204

¹¹⁹ Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language*, pp. 23-4

contingent, broad historico-poetic imagination that includes Medb, the “Wind that Shakes the Barley,” and the contemporary discursive environment of 1987. In place of this imagined feminine figure, Boland decisively reframes the feminine figure on a personal, tangible entity: herself (or, rather, the speaker herself.) The speaker begins the poem in a state of explicit rejection, stating: “I won’t go back to it— // my nation displaced / into old dactyls, / oaths made / by the animal tallows / of the candle—... the songs / that bandage up the history, / the words / that make a rhythm of the crime // where time is time past.”¹²⁰ The opening is an explicit, direct rejection, emphasized by its single-line stanza and a personal, first-person voice. Similar to “The New Pastoral,” the speaker is concerned with the “displacement” of Ireland through a revival of older, traditional poetic forms—that is, “old dactyls.” The adjectival descriptor “old” spurns the poetic traditions of the past and, through the assonance of “D” and “L” sounds between the adjective and object, “dactyls” is not just metonymously transfigured into poetry, but the specific kind of “old” poetic tradition that the speaker rejects. This metonymy betrays how the speaker refuses to address the object of her criticism directly, thereby refusing to validate its very existence. The speaker continues to deride the material origins of such a poetic tradition, beginning with “oaths made by the animal tallows of the candle.” Materially underdeveloped, the origins of this poetry, the speaker fears, will confer a stunted material development of Ireland, a romanticization of the past that deters cultural and material progress. This romantic modality—“the songs” and “the words” of a lost poetic tradition—obstructs history with “bandages” and reifies “crime” into “rhythm.” Such history and crime, the speaker declares, belongs to a historical moment “where time is time past.” As such, the

¹²⁰ Boland, “Mise Eire,” p. 156

speaker rejects a revitalization of a historical poetic form, wary of the dangers and historical oversights in such an appropriation.

Continuing to ground the poem in a personal voice, the speaker also adopts a material, naturalist orientation (similar to Heaney's earlier work, such as in "Requiem for the Croppies"). Reiterating her rejection rather explicitly, the speaker curtly remarks, "No. I won't go back. / My roots are brutal: // I am the woman... // who practices / the quick frictions, / the rictus of delight / and gets cambric for it, rice-colored silks."¹²¹ Repeating the opening line with the brief, cutting syntax of a simple "no," the speaker is surely explicit in her rejection. The speaker then relates the Irish language's poetic origins to her own, using the naturalist image of "roots" to conjoin herself with the land that produces both herself and the poetry she rejects. Assuming the personal role of the national, feminine figure of Ireland, the speaker personalizes and materializes the effects of adopting this poetic tradition. The cultural outcome is the practice of "quick frictions" and "the rictus of delight," the artificial motions of adhering to a pleasant (but forced) poetic form. The material outcome is "cambric" and "rice-colored silks." Weaving poems in this old mode effectively weaves these different cloths (cambric and silks, that is) but such artifice is merely "rice-colored," a distant tinge of a food, a material that actually sustains life, instead of poetry and cloth. When the nation occupies itself with the enterprise of old poetry, the speaker contends, the nation subdues itself materially, opting for artifice over material substance. Thus, the speaker makes a functional, materially-oriented case against the politically-motivated historico-poetic reversion to Irish language modes and forms.

¹²¹ Boland, "Mise Eire," p. 156

Ultimately, the speaker focuses on the overall historical legacy of the Irish language and concludes that the fraught, imperial language of English is an affliction that will nonetheless heal. The speaker continues her personal orientation, identifying herself as the woman, “mingling the immigrant / guttural with the vowels / of homesickness who neither / knows nor cares that // a new language is a kind of scar / and heals after a while / into a passable imitation / of what went before.”¹²² In another parallel to “The New Pastoral,” the speaker is rendered as an alien in her native Ireland, speaking the “immigrant guttural.” This sense of displacement and alienation is further augmented by the speaker’s “homesickness,” linguistically displaced from Ireland via the imperial mechanism of language. The most compelling phrase, however, is the phrase “neither knows nor cares” before the last stanza. Consistently opposed to the revival of Irish poetry, there is still an identification with Ireland—depicted through the speaker’s “homesickness”—and this identification with conventional signifiers of Ireland is an important nuance to the speaker’s opposition. Functionally opposed, the speaker still feels a sentimental attachment to Irish and Ireland, and is therefore indifferent to English being “a kind of scar” that “heals after a while.”

Even the cautionary posturing against maintaining old poetic forms in “The New Pastoral” or old poetic languages in “Mise Eire” can be tinged with sentimental attachment, despite an otherwise aggressive attachment. Indeed, not only does the title “Mise Eire” orient the political project of Irish poetry to the personal, material realities of women, but “Mise Eire” also reflects the personal, inextricable attachment to national identity. Just as history and poetry are integrated in the Irish tradition, so too is the historical and poetic

¹²² Boland, “Mise Eire,” p. 156

understanding of Ireland rooted in the personal experiences of the Irish. In this manner, this poem is not merely cautionary and grounded in a material reality, like “The New Pastoral,” but rather includes the nuance of personal imaginations of Ireland that historico-poetics interpellate into the people of Ireland. Despite this immaterial sentiment, Boland is stern overall, preferring a functional poetics that promotes material development, as opposed to a violent poetics of death: a poetics that romanticizes a dead, long past land, through an unfortunately past language. Through the very critique of such an outdated poetic form, Boland already offers different poetic forms and languages, if not wholly different poetic ontologies and traditions to replace them.

Conclusion

Whereas Heaney exacts his criticism of relying too heavily on the constraints of history, the works of Boland are again helpful in her criticism of poetry as affecting a limited perspective on the extent of historicity. In other words, Heaney’s work is moreover useful for the role of history-writing-poetry, and Boland’s is moreover useful for the role of poetry-writing-history—a subtle, but important, distinction.

There must, moreover, be a more materialist and grounded analysis to violence, whereby violence is not only poetically rendered for public edification, but tangibly and viscerally grasped for historical cautioning. Heaney and Boland are both largely grounded in the soil, refusing to reify the land Ireland into the abstract and the romantic, but rather work with the stable, material reality of Ireland. By extension, the poetic historiographies of the likes of Yeats—whose romanticization and utilization of the ancient past resonates

too strongly with fascism—must be considered in their very construction: that they are *poetry*, removed from ordinary form, and *historiography*, the deliberate reforming of history. Heaney and Boland, by contrast, present a gradual historiographical development. In the context of their own work, they slowly develop different poetic orientations and historical modalities. Heaney inverts the progression of Yeats, moving from the material to the abstract of history, and yet he does not descend into the dangerous political implications that Yeats does. Conversely, Boland maintains a steady critique of historico-poetic traditions and their effects in Ireland, yet she gradually modifies her critique to account for the personal and affective experiences of people alongside the material analysis. More than Heaney, Boland positions compelling and tangible historico-poetics through her own personal and immediate histories, effectively contributing her own narratives to the broader, “inextricable” composite of History. Although they would rather extricate themselves from history to render new, peaceful ontological conditions during the Troubles, Heaney and Boland ultimately critique and add to the vast historico-poetic canon that they are both inextricably bound in. Thus, the historico-poetic framework functions to posit the personal histories and perspectives of those like Heaney and Boland through the production of poetry, meaningfully contributing to a broader apparatus of history through the unconventionally historical modality that is poetry.

Indeed, the contingent history that precedes them—a violent Gaelic past in the *Táin*, or a violent colonial subjugation involving Yeats’s “Easter, 1916”—is too fraught with blood: it is tempting to suspend the danger through the comforting coil of mythology. The project of ending further bloodshed and violence, however, necessitates a direct

engagement with these wretched material conditions—such is the project embodied the immeasurably valuable figures of Heaney and Boland.

Afterword

Adopting the first-person for the first time in this thesis feels like a sigh of relief. For all of this work focusing on how poets detach or avoid detaching from historicity, I always felt that I was moreover projecting myself onto these poets in my attempt to remain detached, myself.

In any case, I would like to offer my deepest thanks to Professor Schoenberger for being my adviser, as well as being the director for the English Honors Program. I would also like to thank my second reader, Professor Reynolds. I would also like to thank those in the English Honors Program whose work has been inspiring, and whose assistance and company was incredibly helpful. Lastly, I would like to thank my friends for enduring (and encouraging) my fixation on Ireland.

This thesis was completely during quarantine, after Holy Cross students all returned home halfway through the spring semester. The alienation of this period can be cutting, but such is a minor obstruction towards the health of the common good. Even so, I would like to impart one last poetic excerpt regarding this sense of alienation and disturbance. Despite my thesis' focus on the Irish and English languages and Eavan Boland, this excerpt is in French and is not Boland's poem "Quarantine." In a letter written by Baudelaire, he concludes a tempestuous portion of his life, optimistically concluding that, "jamais l'idée d'une séparation irréparable n'était entrée clairement dans mon esprit;"¹²³(never did the idea of an irreparable separation enter clearly in my spirit).

¹²³ Porche, *Baudelaire*, p. 265

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